



THE CHRISTMAS CHRONICLES

# THE ENCHANTED FROST

A LITTLE MATCH GIRL, JACK FROST,  
AND A CHRISTMAS CAROL RETELLING

CAMILLE PETERS

THE ENCHANTED FROST



**CAMILLE PETERS**

THE ENCHANTED FROST

By: Rosewood Publications

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## CHAPTER 1



### *Blanche*

The world had drained of color, as if winter had cloaked it in dark hues that mirrored the dreariness pressing against my heart that dampened my spirit beyond redemption. My breath rose in visible puffs, mingling with the clouded sky above. Ice crackled beneath my feet with each weary step, the muddy sleet squelching through my worn shoes, soaking them through entirely and submerging my toes in fresh chill, though my feet were so numb I scarcely felt it.

The streets were shrouded in a damp, dismal mist, and the bitter wind cut through my threadbare shawl, its icy fingers threatening to tear it from my shivering frame. Desperately, I clutched it closer in a feeble effort to shield myself from the frigid air, but the thin layer offered little protection against the relentless chill—a coldness that served as a cruel reminder that I was still alive...somehow.

The frost nipped at my gloveless hands, numbing my fingers until they ceased to bend properly. It took all my strength to maintain my hold on the basket of matches whose contents hadn't diminished despite my exhausting efforts to sell them.

My frozen fingers curled painfully around a scant handful, my thumb habitually tracing their wooden length—a gesture that I performed every hour, my only means of marking time. The number remained unchanging, a silent testament to my failure that reminded me with increasing severity that my chances of survival were dwindling.

I stared blankly at the thin matches clutched in my stiff hand, their presence almost condemning in the dim light. Slowly, I took in the empty streets, devoid of any potential customers. Everyone had taken refuge from the encroaching night, leaving me alone with my despair.

A sigh escaped, forming a wispy cloud in the cold air. Tonight's hunger would be inescapable, as constant as the biting cold that had become an extension of myself, marking yet another endless day without food, the kind that occurred so often I'd long since lost count.

As I passed by a decorated store window, my gaunt reflection caught my eye—sunken cheeks and hollow eyes stared back at me. Just beyond the glass lay a row of baked goods, sugar-frosted buns, and raisin-studded gingerbread I'd once enjoyed regularly. The sight awakened my ravaging stomach, a gnawing hunger that twisted with resentment as fierce as the cold seeping through my stiff limbs; the frigid elements were nothing to the bitterness encasing my heart.

*How had my life come to this?*

Resentment stirred dormant memories, resurrecting buried fragments I wanted nothing more than to forget. A year hadn't been long enough to process the events that had shattered my life; even if I could understand them, no amount of comprehension would bring peace to the twist of fate that had trapped me in the cruel circumstances in which I now found myself entangled.

Flashes of memory drifted in and out of my thoughts like the icy wind, a haunting dance of the past with my present—glimmers of splendor and abundance, once so familiar, contrasted sharply with the stark poverty now defining my existence. I could almost hear the echoes of laughter and see the carefree smiles that once filled my days with sunshine and warmth before they faded into the deafening silence of the winter night pressing around me. The bright hopes I'd nurtured for a promising future now lay shattered, cracked like the ice beneath my feet.

It wasn't the symbols of my wealth that I missed, but the simple pleasures I hadn't appreciated until they were snatched away—the soothing heat from the fireplace whose golden glow chased away the chill that now seemed permanently lodged in my bones; the comforting scent of freshly baked bread wafting from the kitchens, where there was always more than enough to eat; an entire wardrobe of warm clothes and a bed to sleep in; days spent in idle comfort, free from the pressing worry of survival. That time felt like a lifetime ago, a distant dream that had dissolved into the harsh reality of constant hunger and cold biting at my skin.

I once had a future brimming with promise, but those dreams had become nothing more than brittle fragments, trampled by the relentless march of time and cruel circumstance. The bitter chill of the night had seeped into my soul, turning my hopes to ice and leaving only the hollow shell of the person I once was.

My footing slipped on the slick path, forcing my attention back to the present. The need to stay upright reluctantly pulled me from the dreary reminiscences that, for all their pain, had at least provided a fleeting escape from my cruel reality, offering me a rare semblance of refuge.

Fog swirled through the streets as the hour grew later, shrouding the cobblestones in a misty haze. Dim candlelight flickered from the windows of the buildings I passed, the blinds not yet drawn in some. They glowed with rich color, a stark contrast to the darkness enveloping me. Envy stirred my frozen heart with each glimpse of the cozy warmth lying beyond my reach, as distant as an impossible dream.

The frozen darkness deepened as the night wore on, leaving me so cold and weary that I felt as if I'd become one of the bare trees lining the avenue whose frozen, lifeless limbs stretched towards the starless sky. Yet even with exhaustion weighing down my limbs, I had no choice but to press on if I wished to survive.

I scanned the streets for any potential customers, desperately hoping for a shred of pity that might allow me to eat. The area was nearly empty, and the few people who remained passed by without a glance, having no reason to notice the forlorn beggar in the street. Those who basked in warmth and comfort lived in a world entirely separate from mine, one that had no need for the matches that were my only means of survival.

Their cold indifference contained a haunting familiarity, one that echoed beyond the usual disregard I faced. My memory flickered, once more conjuring visions from a distant past that now felt like a faded dream. The frigid night had frozen my thoughts, but I managed to piece together a few broken fragments: a version of myself adorned in rich velvet and glistening jewels, lifting my nose at the urchins too insignificant for my esteemed notice.



That once-familiar reflection now seemed like a stranger, someone I couldn't reconcile with the wretchedness that had befallen me. I was too drained to feel shame at the reminder of my past cruelty, the cold and hunger overwhelming every other emotion.

Fate was a vengeful force indeed.

Footsteps suddenly sounded on the path behind me. I half-turned to see a gentleman, fur hat snug over his head and arms laden with parcels, hurrying through the streets with his head bowed against the wind. I managed to rouse myself just enough to extend my frozen hand. "Sir, would you like to buy—"

He rushed past without a word, his elbow brushing against me in his haste. The jolt sent my precious matches spilling across the frozen cobblestones. Mud and snow soaked my skirt as I crouched to gather them, too tired to muster the withering glare in the departing man's direction I once might have given.

I glanced up just long enough to see his unique gait as he hurried towards his warm home. A glimmer of recognition stirred, a fleeting image of the same man standing before me at a grand ball, his hand extended hopefully, while I dismissed him with a scornful laugh and brushed past him. Now he was the one who couldn't spare a glance for me.

I shook my head to dispel the thought. I couldn't afford to reminisce when my livelihood lay perishing on the snowy ground. I retrieved each match, handling them as carefully as precious jewels. The gesture stirred another recollection from my foggy past—of the gemstones and jewelry I used to own. Yet now, these matches were far more valuable with all they represented, not mere luxury but the difference between life and death.

My relief was short-lived when I counted my retrieved matches over and over, each time coming up one short. Panic swelled as my eyes scanned the dim street, searching desperately for the missing match...only to find it broken and trodden underfoot a meter away, now useless.

I collapsed to my knees in defeat, staring blankly at the splintered shards. No matter how much I willed it, they wouldn't come back together—a cruel reminder that no matter the amount of labor I rendered, nothing could restore my life to what it had once been.

Normally my mind was as numb as my chilled body, but my thoughts had trodden the familiar path of regret too often. I followed the familiar grooves my frequent reminiscence had carved, revisiting each dreadful event that had led to my current circumstances. The exhibit of my past hadn't changed since my world had shattered, but my previous bitterness at my fate gradually faded as exhaustion and hunger took their toll; regrets paled in significance when each breath was a fight for survival.

A sudden chill brushed my cheek as frosty snowflakes gathered on my eyelids. I blinked and slowly lifted my face to the sky, from whence snow had begun to fall, quickly accumulating to blanket the slumbering world around me. The few remaining potential customers in the streets hurried to take refuge, robbing me of my last chance to earn enough for even a meager meal, marking yet another night of hunger.

The gnawing emptiness in my stomach had grown too accustomed to this fate to protest; sleep would be my only reprieve. I shakily rose and trudged through the snow in search of a place to pass the bitter night. Darkness had fully settled by the time my wanderings took me to an abandoned alley, and while the towering walls offered some protection from the snow, they did little against the cold that seemed to deepen within the gathering shadows' slithery reach.

My legs suddenly gave out beneath me and I stumbled. I dragged my weak body the remaining distance across the snowy ground and nestled into the corner where the two walls met. I leaned wearily against the rough stones, pressing myself as far into the corner as the angle allowed.

Closing my eyes, I sought refuge in the only sanctuary I had left—my memories. On impulse, I fumbled with a match, striking it clumsily, its monetary value meaningless in that moment compared to the brief respite it provided from the cold. I watched, transfixed, as the tiny flame flickered against the frozen night, reminiscent of the countless matches my servants had once lit to illuminate the grand halls of my manor, where the fires always roared and banished the cold.

The flame danced, casting a soft, golden light that seemed to pull a vision from the depths of my past—the warmth of my home, the company that used to fill the rooms, the comfort of a life where hunger was a distant, unknown concept. I was transported to that moment in time, surrounded by the things I had lost. But the vision was fleeting; as the flame sputtered out, so did the illusion, leaving me in the bitter darkness once more.

But the vision vanished as quickly as the match burned out. Desperate to reclaim that comforting vision I hastily struck another with trembling fingers. This time, instead of bringing forth the familiar reminiscences of my past, the flame revealed something entirely unexpected—the face of a mystical young man who seemed to emerge from the surrounding shadows, his features softly framed by the match's golden glow. His vivid blue eyes captured me, piercing through the cold that had encased my heart to fill me with a sense of calm that made me believe that I could endure this endless winter for a little while longer.

The light trembled in the icy air, as if desperate to hold onto that fleeting hope... until it burned down to my fingertips and the flame disappeared into the night. The enigmatic man vanished, leaving me alone once more with only the cold pressing around me with renewed force.

The match slipped from my fingers as the last of my strength drained away, the tiny flame flickering out as if extinguishing my final glimmer of hope. The icy air pierced my lungs with each shaky breath, every inhale a sharp, unforgiving reminder of the cold's relentless grip. My vision blurred, the once-distinct hues of grey and white blending into an indiscernible swirl of color, as if the world itself was dissolving into a shapeless void.

As my senses dulled, the cold became an unyielding presence, sinking deeper into my bones, a force that wrapped around me, tightening its grip as it pulled me into the depths of the night's unforgiving embrace. My thoughts grew sluggish, slipping away like the fleeting warmth of the match, leaving only a profound emptiness as the freezing darkness threatened to consume me.

I felt myself drifting in and out of consciousness, locked in a futile battle with the elements that prevented me from succumbing to the sleep that promised escape. Time stretched on until through the velvety night a light glistened like a shooting star. In my delirium, it transformed into the figure of a young man, resembling the one I thought I'd glimpsed in the match's dancing flame. He emerged from the swirling snow as if part of winter itself.

For a fleeting moment, I wondered if this surreal presence was an angel beckoning me from the brink of death before I remembered that there was no one left, alive or dead, who cared for me. I blinked, trying to dispel what I assumed was a figment of my imagination, but instead of fading, the vision drew closer, allowing me to faintly discern his features.



I could only stare, mesmerized by the otherworldly beauty that seemed untouched by the surrounding dreariness. My mind barely stirred enough to prompt me to reach for my basket of matches, but my lips were too frozen to ask if this stranger wanted to buy one. My arm fell limply to my side as my strength finally gave out.

The unconsciousness that had been waiting in the wings gently enfolded me as the world dimmed, leaving only inky darkness behind my closed eyelids. The last thing I saw was a flash of white hair and brilliant blue eyes before the darkness fully descended upon me, at last drawing me into the warmth I'd been desperately seeking...the most relief I'd experienced since I'd fallen from grace.

So this was what it felt like to die.

## CHAPTER 2



### *Frost*

Snowflakes glistened in the moonlight, a ballet against the backdrop of the velvety night, their delicate dance guided by the gentle wind in a wintry symphony that was mine to command. I summoned a handful of magic, shaping it with the ease of a master sculptor, molding it into a new snowflake with intricate, lacy patterns carved into the frost.

I took a moment to admire the delicate mosaic before releasing it with an icy breath, sending it to join the gentle snowfall. Creating these fleeting masterpieces never lost its charm, even after centuries. The mortals seldom noticed my handiwork, yet the joy of crafting each snowflake never waned.

The snowfall I'd carefully orchestrated was now unfolding in perfect harmony with my magical calculations and no longer needed my guidance, yet I lingered, content to watch the performance—only one in the infinite wintry days that had filled my immortal life.

Truly there was nothing as beautiful as winter.

As I reveled in the serene scene, an unspoken sense drifted through the snow-laden wind to tug at my awareness, shattering the hypnotic spell. I tilted my head, listening to the message carried on the brisk breeze as it rustled the bare branches before drifting away. I sighed, reluctant to confront the shadow that marred the beauty of my favorite season.

*There can be no creation without destruction.* Nature thrived on balance, without which all the delicate patterns that comprised the world would unravel. Yet understanding that truth did little to ease the weight of this particular responsibility.

With one last lingering look at the gentle snowfall blanketing the woods, I heeded the invisible guidance of my power. It led me from the forest to a nearby town, where the snow cast a glistening sheen across the rooftops like powdered sugar, transforming the streets below into a muddy slush.

The magic led me to a wretched sight—rags huddled in a dirty corner of an abandoned alley. My heart cinched as I took in the small, frail figure before me, fearing I'd been tasked with claiming a child. But a more thorough examination instead revealed a petite woman, her body curled in on itself in a feeble effort to shield against the cold that had claimed her.

I released a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. This duty was never pleasant, but at least my victim had lived long enough to experience more than a child's short life before fatally succumbing to the elements.

A thick layer of snow had settled over her, transforming her into a somber, frozen sculpture whose features, while not extraordinary for a human woman,

caught my attention for some reason I couldn't quite discern, as though there were something I should know about her. Her breath, once visible in misty puffs, had slowed to a sporadic, shallow whisper as she hovered between life and death. Her eyes, once wide with desperation, were now closed in a tranquil but unnatural stillness, her final moments marked by a chilling quiet—a frozen pause in time as nature's cruel embrace tightened around her.

I suddenly noticed a spent match resting on the woman's tattered dress, filling the night with the faint odor of sulfur, contrasting sharply with the clean scent of fresh snow. A thin tendril of wispy smoke rose from its charred tip, a fleeting remnant of the fire that had just been extinguished. It gave me pause—something about this small detail stirred an unfamiliar sensation within me, a connection I'd never felt before that I couldn't quite place.

I stepped closer, my power simmering just beneath my fingertips, ready to assist the grave in claiming its victory. Though my footsteps made no sound she stirred with a faint moan, her eyelids fluttering open just enough to stare unseeingly in my direction. I watched her silent struggle against the encroaching unconsciousness that threatened her, as if she instinctively knew that surrendering to it would mean never waking again.

I crouched in front of her, taking in her appearance. Her ashen skin was nearly as white as the snow that had accumulated in her hair, and many of the exposed areas had already darkened to a purplish hue—the cruel marks of the final stages of frostbite...my least favorite aspect of the cold, but one that fell within my domain. Her lips, cracked and tinged with blue, barely moved, frozen in what might have been a final, silent cry for help that never came.

My fingers brushed against her icy skin before I pressed them gently to her chest to measure the slow, feeble beats of her heart. I heaved a weary sigh. Her symptoms were unmistakably hypothermia. Even after all these years, it was still hard to reconcile that the cold I found enchanting and invigorating could also be the means to end something as precious as life. The beauty of winter possessed a harshness that was cruel to vulnerable mortals, but though it was a sight I'd witnessed countless times before, it never made my duty any easier.

The magic I summoned glowed against my palm in an illumination of aqua light that cast a glistening sheen across her pallid skin. I held it aloft, prepared to use it to seize her last breath, but as the minutes drifted by as slow and steady as the gentle snowfall, her final exhale never came.

I wove my magic around one of her labored breaths...only for it to unexpectedly slip from my grasp in an uncanny show of resistance. My brow furrowed and I once more rested my hand over her weakening heartbeat. Over the centuries, I'd become an expert in recognizing the signs of death by frost, having claimed countless souls with the same icy touch. She was undeniably succumbing to the cold, yet for some inexplicable reason, I couldn't complete my claim over her soul. Was it possible that it wasn't her time to die? If that was the case, why had my magic guided me to her?

A flicker of relief washed over me before I could push it away. I shook my head firmly. Emotions had no place in this particular work—becoming involved with those I was destined to claim would only complicate matters. Yet despite my efforts to remain detached, the situation had already taken an unexpected turn.

I summoned my powers again, but they flickered briefly before vanishing entirely, swallowed by the still night. My magic had never disobeyed me before. I stared in disbelief at the empty space where it had dissipated, but although I could still sense its presence lingering beneath my skin, it seemed to have developed a

will of its own, preventing me from claiming this enigmatic woman's life.

This unexplainable riddle eluded me, leaving me with a sense of unease as the cold continued its relentless embrace. I stared at her, as if the answer could be found in her frozen features. She appeared entirely unremarkable—no different from the countless other souls I'd claimed—yet something about her held me captive, as mesmerized as when I watched the drifting snow.

Curiosity stirred, not the typical idle wonderings about the lives of the people whose paths I crossed, but a feeling that niggled something deep within my mind, an emotion so rare in my unchanging existence that it felt almost foreign. My breath mingled with the icy air as I knelt closer and stared at her, struggling to reconcile her presence with the unusual resistance I faced—this wasn't mere stubborn magic, but a force beyond the simple cold I wielded.

I scanned the surroundings in search of clues, but the night remained still and silent save for the whisper of the wind rustling the bare branches. The snowfall had thickened, blanketing the world in white, while the icy breeze seemed to carry a faint whisper—a hint of something ancient and powerful.

Her ragged breaths gradually grew fainter, each one a testament to her struggle against the inevitable. Yet despite her nearing end, something hovered unspoken in the air—a subtle warmth that clashed with the frigid landscape, as if the snowflakes themselves were part of a greater design, one that held her within a cocoon of fragile protection.

A wave of understanding washed over me. In a world governed by ancient, immutable forces, the magic that resisted my claim on her soul must be equally potent, woven into the very essence of existence, rooted in a bond that transcended the mortal realm.

It was clear that something profound was at work, an ancient magic that bound this mortal to the world in a way I could not easily unravel. Such power tied to the connections between all living beings would transcend even death.

I hesitated, caught between my duty and the enigmatic force before me. My power, once unwavering, now faltered in the presence of something beyond my comprehension. The winter I controlled with ease seemed to waver, as if the forces at play were challenging the very nature of my existence.

This cold realization settled over me like the snow continuing its gentle descent, each flake a symbol of the mystery surrounding her final moments. Whatever force protected her, it was one I could not easily penetrate. I felt the weight of this ancient mystery hanging in the frigid air—a reminder that even as the harbinger of winter's chill, I was but a small part of a much larger, more profound tapestry, with no clear path to completing my duty when the forces at play were beyond my control.

Though I was prevented from completing my usual task, my magic had led me here for a purpose; surely I wasn't meant to merely observe her struggles. With a shuddering breath I rose to my feet, my gaze lingering on her frail form. After a moment's hesitation, I made an instinctive decision and scooped her into my arms. I expected her to be heavy, burdened by the hardships of her life, but her malnourished frame proved light and I carried her effortlessly.

To my surprise, she didn't flinch from my icy touch but instead nestled closer, as if drawn to warmth in any form, even from a being of frost. Her soft, shivering body pressed against me and my breath caught. I'd always existed in isolation, my magic and winter's beauty my sole companions, but her proximity stirred something deep within me—a sensation in a dormant part of my heart that until this moment I hadn't known existed.

Though I couldn't fully comprehend this newfound feeling, it compelled me to hold her a little tighter. She seemed extraordinarily fragile, far more delicate than I had ever imagined humans to be. Despite my power, which was thwarted by an unseen force preventing me from claiming her soul, she remained on the precipice of death—a force against which I found myself helpless.

I moved slowly through the snow, my footsteps measured and deliberate to avoid disturbing her rest. She emitted a faint moan but did not awaken, her eyes remaining closed and her head resting against my chest in a fitful slumber. After a short distance from the village, I paused to adjust her in my arms. She groaned softly in response but quickly settled back into her position.

An unfamiliar sensation tightened around my chest. I frowned, concerned by the impact this mortal's presence was having on my immortal form, but I pushed aside my confusion in favor of focusing on the more pressing matter at hand.

The magic that had receded earlier rather than claim her frozen soul now eagerly responded to my command. I extended my hand and caressed the moisture in the air with my fingertips, gathering and freezing it to create a shimmering wall of ice. My power illuminated the frozen surface with a swirl of color and light, gradually forming an image of my destination before settling into a still, crystalline vision.

I glanced down hesitantly at the still figure in my arms. I'd never taken anyone through a portal before, much less a human teetering on the brink of death. Though I could bring her into my frozen realm, I knew I couldn't revive her. My powers, so adept at creating winter, were helpless against the chill that was already consuming her.

With a wavering breath, I tightened my hold around her frail body and stepped into the portal. The magic curled around us, guiding us gently along an invisible path that existed on a higher plane than the mortal world we were momentarily leaving behind. One moment we were enveloped in a swirl of glistening blue light, and the next it melted away, causing our new surroundings to emerge like ripples settling in a pond to reveal a reflection.

We now stood in a vast clearing thousands of miles north from the nearest human habitation. At the crest of a snow-covered hill loomed a crystal castle, its mismatched turrets climbing to disappear into the freezing fog. The structure sparkled like a cut diamond, rising majestically as if woven from golden sunlight, a crown against the wintry landscape. Stones of varying sizes and shapes formed the structure, each a portion of the history I'd spent honing my craft. From afar, the castle appeared as a uniform sheen of white, but up close it revealed a delicate lattice of frost intricately carved into the ice.

The drawbridge lowered in welcome as I approached, my magic recognizing my return; I felt it swirling curiously around me and my unconscious guest. My footsteps echoed through the vaulted corridors as I carried my frail burden inside, heading to my chamber. I gently laid her on the frozen slab of ice that served as my bed. Though the sudden chill against her back made her shiver, she remained unconscious.

I crouched beside her, studying the first living soul ever to enter my home. Sunlight filtered through the frosted windowpanes, casting dappled patterns across her face. Even beneath the sunken cheeks and the haggard lines etched by her harsh life, she was quite pretty.

A glint of silver caught my eye and I noticed something protruding from a hole-riddled pocket in the side of her skirt. Curiously I bent closer, but as if sensing my movement, she shifted, her arm covering whatever trinket she kept close.

I stared a moment before extending an uncertain hand to wipe away the droplets of water that had formed against her cheek from the melting snow. My cold caress gradually lured her from sleep. She shifted restlessly, her brow furrowing, before finally opening her eyes.

## CHAPTER 3



### *Blanche*

*I*drifted in and out of consciousness, teetering on the border of a dreamless darkness and the world that for all its harshness I still fiercely clung to. In the end, the instinct to survive that had consumed me ever since my descent into poverty eventually pulled me from the inky tendrils that sought to obscure my awareness.

The first thing I noticed was the cold far different than the exposure to the elements I was accustomed to. While not as penetrating as the biting chill that had consumed me when I'd frozen in the alley, this subtle, pervasive cold trickled over me like the tide on a frigid winter beach, leaving behind a trail of icy prickles that seeped into my body and caused my limbs to ache, a painful reminder of the reality that had dimmed temporarily.

My eyes slowly fluttered open to find an alabaster ceiling adorned with delicate carvings that glistened in the golden light—a stark contrast to the dirty grey hues of the alley of my last memory. I attempted to stretch my memory back to fill in the blank spaces between when I'd succumbed to the darkness and ended up here, but found nothing.

Was this...heaven? Reason immediately dismissed the notion; not only was it too cold, but a peaceful paradise seemed like the last place someone like me would end up.

Movement drew my gaze to the far side of the room where a man with an appearance unlike any I'd ever seen hovered uncertainly, watching me apprehensively, as though he expected me to shatter at any moment. Startled by his unexpected presence, I tried to sit up, but the icy air seemed to keep me bound to the glacial slab where I lay, as if it had frozen me in place.

His brow furrowed. "It appears you're awake." Awkwardness filled each haltered word that suggested he was unaccustomed to interacting with others, yet I drank them in eagerly; it had been so long since anyone had spoken to me except with impatience and condescension. For all my former expertise in conversation, I'd had little practice in the art this past year.

I could only stare at this almost angelic stranger. He advanced a hesitant step, bringing his features further into the light. My breath caught. Not only was he strikingly handsome, but he exuded an otherworldly aura that only reinforced the notion that I must have died. From the fuzzy snippets of my fragmented memory, I recalled glimpsing his pure white hair, ashen skin the color of fallen snow, and startling blue eyes just before I'd lost consciousness.



“What happened? Where am I?” My voice tentative emerged, raspy from disuse.

“You froze to death,” he said simply.

My sharp gasp escaped as a fleeting puff in the frigid air. “*Froze to death?*”

He winced, as if just realizing his frank assessment had been too direct, and offered a tentative nod.

Due to delirium, it was a struggle to make sense of the words that were at odds with my current awareness that made me feel very much alive. “So I’m dead after all?”

For as long as I’d fought to survive, I didn’t have the energy to be more emotional over this turn of events. I wriggled my fingers experimentally. Though the stiffness from the cold restricted the movement, I seemed to be in possession of my senses, making it appear that I hadn’t succumbed to death.

He seemed to sense my unspoken confusion. “I believe you’re in a state of in-between,” he explained. “Humans cannot otherwise enter a structure crafted by an immortal.”

These baffling words managed to penetrate the thick fog that had been clouding my senses ever since I’d awoken. “Human? *Immortal?*”

He nodded. “Despite that, for some reason I still struggled to claim your soul.”

The longer this surreal conversation extended, the more convinced I became that I must be dreaming. Any moment now I expected to awaken huddled in the cold, dim alley where my last vivid memory had taken place.

As the last wisps of unconsciousness faded, I gradually became aware of the room’s breathtaking splendor—a sanctuary sculpted entirely from snow and ice. Momentarily forgetting the confusing conversation, I turned my head to take in my incredible surroundings. Every piece—from the elegantly carved chairs to the gleaming tables—was a masterpiece of frozen artistry, reflecting the delicate lattice patterns and intricate carvings as if each were a frost-kissed jewel, a testament to the magical craftsmanship that had brought it into existence.

Elaborate frostwork adorned the walls, enhancing the faint light that filtered through the crystalline surfaces. The light shimmered in soft, iridescent hues, creating a mesmerizing interplay of light and shadow whose patterns danced like delicate snowflakes caught in a gentle winter breeze.

For a moment awe captured all speech before I finally found my voice. “Where is this place?”

“My Winter Kingdom.”

True to its name, the elegant setting seemed to have emerged straight from the pages of the storybooks from my haunting past, as if I had been transported into a dream.

“How did I get here? Wasn’t I just—”

“I carried you after you fell unconscious.”

“You...carried me?” A frigid breeze blew through the partially open window, cutting through my thin, damp rags and sending a shiver across my body—miserable sensations that contradicted my earlier assumption that I was no longer alive.

Worry tightened his expression. “I wish there was something I could do to warm you, but my magic specializes in creating cold, not dispelling it.” He cast his uncertain gaze about the room, as if half-hoping a source of heat would magically materialize.

I held up my arm, only just now noticing the purplish splotches marring my skin. “What’s this?”

“A sign of frostbite.”

I lightly traced the blisters patterning my pale arm, icy to the touch but surprisingly less painful than I expected, as if the damage had halted midway when I became trapped in this in-between state he claimed I now inhabited. He watched me with a helpless expression before bridging the distance to crouch beside me.

“I wonder if there’s a way to reverse the magic I use to create cold...”

I flinched away from his reach, but he gently took hold of my arm, undeterred by my resistance. I wanted to be angry at his impertinence, but I lacked the energy.

He conjured a sphere of glistening aqua light and carefully spread it across my arm, bringing with it a cooling sensation. At first nothing happened, but he persisted. I caught my breath as I noticed that wherever the light touched the frostbite gradually faded, like ice melting in the sun.

His lips curved up. “It appears to be working.”

I gaped, transfixed, before slowly lifting my gaze. “Who are you?”

“Frost, the King of Winter.” He answered my question almost absentmindedly, his focus concentrated on his spell.

I blinked in confusion, certain I’d misheard him. He looked far too serious to be teasing, yet his claim seemed like nothing more than an elaborate fantasy. The legendary Frost was said to be the personification of winter, responsible for frosty weather, coloring the foliage in autumn, and leaving fern-like patterns on windows during the coldest months.

As a child, such stories had made winter seem almost magical, especially because I’d been safely tucked away in my warm manor, far from the frigid outdoors...a reality that now felt worlds away from the harshness I’d experienced this season.

“You’re Frost? *The* Frost?”

His soulful gaze, as deep as the winter sky, finally met mine, no hint of deceit in his expression. Despite the legendary accomplishments attributed to his name, a shy smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “I see my reputation precedes me.” The almost mystical aura surrounding him only lent credibility to his words.

Even with his confirmation and the strange events I’d witnessed—occurrences that appeared almost like magic—I couldn’t bring myself to believe him, still convinced I was trapped in a hallucinatory state, on the brink of succumbing to the death that awaited me.

At my blank skepticism his smile faltered. “You don’t appear to believe me.”

“Of course I don’t. Frost is but a myth; he doesn’t actually exist.”

He shook his head, seeming half-tempted to roll his eyes. “Humans are such doubtful creatures. Contrary to your disbelief I am quite real, far more than the legends that have been told about me for centuries. Just because you’ve never seen something for yourself doesn’t prove it isn’t true...though it appears that you’re someone who disputes evidence even after experiencing it firsthand.”

He gestured towards the magic working on my arm, evidence that should have been enough to refute my doubts. But life had chipped away at my belief in the extraordinary; the further I’d drifted from childhood, the more disillusioned I’d become. This past year with its relentless hardships had only accelerated that transformation, gradually hardening my heart against wonder.

“I have no reason to believe in magic when the absence I’ve experienced has only made my life harder,” I said.

“Then how do you explain its presence in the world around you? Without my powers, there would be no winter.”

He spoke with little consideration for all the discomfort the harsh season had brought me and I replied with a coldness that befit my surroundings. “There is nothing enchanting about winter.”

His frown deepened but he didn’t refute my words. Instead, he returned to tending to my frostbite, his supposed powers gradually healing the damage the cold had inflicted. Yet even as the visible marks faded, the icy sensation lingered, a prickling reminder of the frost that had nearly claimed me.

He was correct that even with the supposed evidence of his magic working on my body, my mind refused to accept his assertion. Nothing that had happened since I awoke made sense, causing me to doubt I was experiencing anything more than a vivid hallucination.

Once he finished with my arm, Frost examined his work before carefully checking the other exposed areas of my body for any spots he might have missed. Satisfied, he gathered his magic like one would compact a snowball, lifting the remaining cold from my skin and seeming to absorb it back into himself.

Without the distraction of his healing, an awkward silence settled between us, thick and uncomfortable. My recent interactions, limited to the scorns and ridicule of passerby or the desperate attempts to sell the matches that represented my survival, had left me unpracticed in normal conversation—let alone with someone who claimed to be a legendary being.

Frost shifted in his crouched position, his gaze darting around the room as if searching for something to say. Finally, he cleared his throat. “Are you still cold?” On cue, another shiver rippled over me, and his expression turned apologetic. “I’m not sure there’s anything more I can do to help.”

It was only then that I noticed he himself wore no jacket or cloak. “Aren’t *you* cold?” My chattering teeth made it difficult to force the words past my dry throat.

He chuckled as if he found my words amusing...and if he truly was *Frost* as he claimed, it was a silly assumption to believe that the embodiment of winter would be bothered by the frigid climate he himself had created.

I gave my head a rigid shake. The very idea was ridiculous...yet it was becoming challenging to deny the evidence found in my icy surroundings and the magic he’d performed.

Awkward silence choked the frigid air before he cleared his throat. “For someone who recently froze to death, you seem remarkably calm, Blanche.”

My pulse quickened at the first utterance of my name in over a year. “How do you know who I am?”

“Magic provides the identity of all the souls that fall under my jurisdiction. Over the millennia, I’ve become acquainted with many urchins such as yourself who’ve fallen unfortunate victims to my cold.”

I flinched at the term *urchin*, though I couldn’t blame him for using it. His attention shifted to my threadbare clothing, a scrutiny that made me shift self-consciously at how tattered my garments were in comparison to the pristine environment around us. His perusal paused at my patchwork pocket where the tops of my matches barely peeked through the holes in the fabric.

He gestured towards them in silent question, but I instinctively shrank back, shielding them with my hand. Logic dictated that I should use any means to get warm—after all, my matches would be entirely useless for a corpse—but I couldn’t shake my reluctance to give up even a portion of my sole livelihood. The frigid air sent painful tingles across my exposed skin, each deepening the cold’s hold that threatened to pull me closer to death’s embrace if I didn’t act soon.

With a heavy heart, I reluctantly pried my hand away and withdrew a match... only to discover that they had become damp from exposure to the elements, rendering them useless. Despair knotted my stomach. Even if I'd survived my ordeal in the alley without his timely rescue, I likely wouldn't have lasted much longer without anything of worth to sell.

Desperate, I struggled in a vain attempt to light the match regardless of its ruined state, but the cold had numbed my fingers, restricting my movement. I fumbled and the match slipped from my grip, landing on the frozen ground.

I stared at it in defeat before Frost silently extended his hand. After a moment's hesitation, I reluctantly handed him the flimsy, waterlogged matches. Instead of immediately lighting one, he examined it with a quizzical air, as if trying to understand how it worked.

"I believe I've seen enough humans use these to know how the process works." He murmured the words to himself, as if he didn't mean for me to hear, and curiosity flickered in his eyes, almost as though he'd long harbored a secret ambition to strike one himself.

After several clumsy attempts, he finally managed to light one with a spark of magic. The struggling flame flickered weakly before sputtering out, leaving nothing behind, not even a twisting wisp of smoke. My stomach clenched in horror at losing a match without gaining so much as a moment's heat.

He stared wide-eyed at the match's blackened tip, as if unable to comprehend what had just happened, then reached for another to try again. This one met the same fate, dying just as quickly. Before he could grab a third match, I slapped his hand away; his skin was so icy it felt as if I'd plunged my hand into snow.

"Stop, you're wasting them!"

His sheepish glance was apologetic. "Generating heat goes against my powers that create winter."

Disheartened, I couldn't muster a response. I simply stared at the spent matches scattered on the white ground like smoldered corpses, their fleeting warmth melting away the thin layer of snow, leaving only cold in their wake.

Frost tilted his head, his expression pensive. "I'd nearly forgotten: even if we succeed in creating a fire, this castle isn't compatible with heat."

"Then how do you survive the winter?"

"I'm Frost," he reminded me. "*I am* winter." He seemed unfazed by my lingering skepticism to his grandiose claim and continued studying the matches as their steam dissipated into the brisk air.

After a moment, he gathered his magic into a glowing orb and moved to a nearby wall. I watched in awe as he began to shape and mold the light with the precision of a master craftsman, his movements fluid and graceful, like a potter working with clay. An elaborate fireplace gradually took form from the shimmering magic, one woven spell at a time. He completed the intricately carved mantle before stepping back to admire his handiwork.

After a moment his approval changed to a frown and he abruptly walked out of the room. I stared after him, unsure whether I'd see him again, but he reappeared shortly with his arms full of freshly cut branches and tinder. Shaking the snow off, he piled them into the newly crafted fireplace.

I was both awed at his ability and touched at his effort, but my admiration was swallowed by the cynicism that shaped my life for so long. "A hearth made of ice is hardly effective against the heat—"

He shrugged dismissively. "I'll simply recreate whatever melts."

I had no response. The further I drifted from the glamor and comforts of my old life and the deeper I sank into poverty, the more I faded beneath everyone's notice. I couldn't fathom why he would go to such lengths for a stranger he'd just met. Considering his self-proclaimed mystical nature, I had reason to question his sanity...which would explain his kindness, a rare currency far more elusive than the meager coins I sometimes managed to scrounge.

When no words were forthcoming, I lowered my gaze to my second-to-last match and shuffled my aching body closer to the newly created fireplace. He extended his hand, but when I offered him the match, instead of taking it, he sent a tendril of magic towards it, absorbing the moisture much like he'd removed the traces of frostbite from my skin. His gesture bolstered me, and this time when I struck the match, the weak spark held steady, allowing me to ignite my first fire after countless days of darkness.

The radiant golden flame danced bravely, casting a warm glow across the icy hues of the crystalized palace. Although initially small, the fire grew, casting pools of comforting heat that thawed my stiff body, warmed my frozen hands, and revived my numb fingers. I stared at my hands as they took on a rosy tint, suffused with a level of warmth and comfort I could scarcely remember experiencing.

As the fire roared to life, the surrounding ice began to melt, creating a delicate play of light and shadow. The flickering flames reflected off the ice, turning it into a dazzling display of glistening patterns. I glanced nervously at Frost, but he remained composed, effortlessly using his magic to replenish the melting ice as needed so that the flames wouldn't go out. This ensured the fire's base remained stable even as it consumed the wood.

His gesture not only kept the flames from extinguishing but also kindled a warmth within me that stoked the embers of hope I'd long believed extinguished, breathing the first promise of life into my heart that I'd thought had been frozen forever.

## CHAPTER 4



### *Frost*

I focused on maintaining the delicate layer of ice lining the hearth, my magic weaving through the snow to sustain the frozen structure while the small fire flickered within. Yet no matter how much I willed myself to concentrate, my gaze kept drifting towards the woman I'd rescued.

She huddled on my bed, a fragile figure swathed in rags that seemed more suited to the streets than to the interior of an ice palace. The sight tugged at something deep within me, a strange sensation that was both pity and a newfound impulse—an unfamiliar desire to help, to do something for someone other than myself.

Why was I, an immortal being, expending so much effort to light a fire in my own ice-bound sanctuary? A fire—something so foreign to my world and contrary to everything I was—just to keep this mortal comfortable? The absurdity gnawed at me, baffling and insistent, yet I couldn't bring myself to extinguish the flame.

The rags she wore only deepened the strange ache in my chest, as if her suffering had reached across the divide between our worlds, stirring an impulse I'd rarely had the chance to act upon in my long, solitary existence. The cold was my domain, my solace, and my strength—yet here I was, bending it to protect a life that should have been just another fleeting presence in my endless winter.

When she finally warmed enough to move, the heat drew her closer. She now knelt beside me—a proximity I'd never shared with another living soul. Her awestruck gaze was transfixed by the flickering flame and the curls of steam rising from the fire whose soft glow dispelled some of the chill, as if she'd never seen anything so beautiful.

I found myself equally mesmerized. I'd seen fires from a distance before, but this was the first time I'd ever been so near one. The heat prickled my skin almost painfully, requiring me to divide my magic between preserving the hearth and maintaining a thin layer of frost over my body. Every instinct urged me to retreat from the warmth that was so foreign to me, but if I moved the fire would die, and with it her fragile warmth would vanish.

And so I stayed, caught between the burning flame and the freezing cold, between the unfamiliar pull of compassion and the duty I'd always known.

Deep down, I knew my efforts were futile. No matter how warm I made her, it wouldn't change the fact that once I discovered why I'd been unable to claim her soul, my powers would compel me to finish the task. Failure to do so would mean losing both my immortality and the abilities that made me the Winter King.

The gravity of this responsibility weighed heavily, yet I found myself increasingly uncertain of how to proceed after the usual course of events had led to this unexplainable obstacle. Though she wasn't quite dead, she wasn't fully alive either—a paradox that gnawed at me with the same persistence as the curiosity that kept drawing my gaze back to her, a sight even more intriguing than the foreign bright flames.

The fire's dancing glow cast shimmers of golden light across her countenance, softening the gaunt pallor that had marked her near-death state and revealing a loveliness that I hastily dismissed. Beauty was something I only associated with winter's artistry, not with a fragile, powerless mortal. I'd seen countless human women—both those considered plain and those considered breathtaking—and while I found human concepts of beauty fascinating I'd never been moved by a mortal face. Yet for all my stubborn protests, my heart stirred with a feeling far different from the numbing chill I had always known.

Even as I tried to keep my gaze averted, I couldn't ignore the warmth softly emanating from her presence. Unlike the harsh heat of the flames which irritated the coldness coating my skin, this warmth was gentler, seeping inside me to curl around my heart, dispelling some of the shadows I hadn't realized had formed from my eternity of solitude until they began to fade. The sensation was unsettling, yet also strangely comforting in a way I couldn't quite understand.

As if my silent thoughts had somehow reached her, Blanche turned away from the dancing flames and cast me a sideways glance, a thoughtful pucker creasing her brow. "Why are you doing this?"

The exhaustion that had previously choked her voice seemed to have faded as the warmth restored her strength. In its place her tone took on a hardened, almost defensive edge, as if she anticipated that her unexpected fortune would be cruelly snatched away at any moment. Mistrust was clear in her gaze each time she tore her eyes away from the fire that attracted her so strongly.

I had no adequate explanation. The last thing I wanted was to shatter the quiet calm that had descended over us like freshly fallen snow by reminding her that I was duty-bound to ensure that the process of her freezing reached its deadly conclusion. Nor did I have an answer that justified my efforts to warm her, efforts that contradicted my ultimate purpose to claim her soul.

She tilted her head at my extended silence, prompting me to respond. "I'm not certain why I chose to save you," I finally admitted. "Perhaps it was nothing more than a whim."

I doubted my honesty was the answer she'd been seeking, but she simply nodded. Her easy acceptance made my conscience prick at keeping the darker details from her, but I hastily dismissed the urge to confide the full truth, reminding myself that the time for such a grim conversation was not so soon after her recovery.

Silence settled around us, broken only by the soft crackling of the embers. After a moment, she shifted her attention from the flames to my persistent efforts to keep them alive. "Aren't you tired?"

"Exhaustion is a state immortal beings have no reason to feel."

She lifted a skeptical brow. "No matter how invincible you believe yourself to be, there's more to resting than simply replenishing your physical energy."

Her dismissive tone couldn't mask the concern I detected in her soft grey eyes—an emotion I'd never experienced directed towards me before, consideration I found both oddly comforting and disconcerting, much like the earlier emotion I'd felt towards her.



After some experimentation, I crafted a spell for the frost to regenerate on its own, allowing me to step away from the full force of the blistering heat against my frozen skin. She leaned forward, inching even closer to the flames, and the soft *clink* of metal against ice caught my attention as something in her pocket shifted.

I gestured towards it. "What's that?"

Blanche hesitated, her hand lingering over her pocket before she slowly withdrew an odd-shaped object and extended it to me. I took it and turned it over in my hand, surprised by its weight. One side was smooth and oval, its polished surface broken only by an intricate engraved symbol, while the back looked like it had snapped off from a hinge.

"It's a door knocker." She offered no rationale as to why it was one of the few items aside from the matches that she carried with her. I returned it without a word and she carefully tucked it back into her pocket. The quietness between us grew heavy, broken only by the fire's crackling embers.

I shifted uncertainly, unsure of what to do next for Blanche now that she was warming up. With no one other than myself ever gracing these halls, my duties as a host felt as elusive as the distant summer in my wintry existence.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" The question escaped me before I could stop it, driven not by politeness but by an unfamiliar desire to ease someone else's discomfort, the first yearning of its kind I'd experienced in my existence.

A blush dusted her cheeks, adding a touch of color to her pallor that caused an odd flutter in my chest. "I can't even remember the last time I've eaten."

Her lips pressed together in an odd mix of resignation and resentment. I studied her, sensing something unusual in her tone, or perhaps her manner of speaking. My long history of observing humans unseen had attuned me to subtle inconsistencies, and there was something about her refined speech that clashed with her threadbare appearance.

Blanche turned back to the flames, and I refocused on the pressing matter at hand, pushing aside my curiosity about her background for the moment. I'd forgotten that humans depended on food to survive, but what did mortal beings eat? For me food was a luxury, not a necessity, leaving me at a loss.

When I asked her, she considered it for a moment. "When circumstances were...different, I used to be picky, but now I'll eat anything."

Her gaze wandered around the room before settling on a bowl on the nightstand filled with winter fruits I'd crafted after centuries of experimentation—a variation of plums infused with the sweetness of sugarplum candy.

Awkwardly, I handed one to her, careful to avoid chilling her with an accidental touch...though deep down, I was more afraid of how her warmth might affect me. She examined the glistening silver fruit with an appraising air before taking a tentative bite.

Her entire countenance lit up. "It's delicious!"

I hadn't realized how much I needed to hear praise for something I had created until she voiced her delight. Relief softened the tension stiffening my posture as a spark of delight shot through my body. "Thank you. I spent years perfecting them."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "You mean you *created* them yourself?"

I shrugged, trying to downplay the effort. "I wanted there to be a fruit that could be enjoyed during my favorite season."

"I didn't think anything beautiful could be found in such a harsh climate." Her murmur seemed to be as if speaking to herself.

Juice dribbled down her chin as she took another bite. Though I was pleased she enjoyed my offering, I knew humans required more than fruit to survive. Yet at

present, I had nothing more to offer. I briefly considered creating a portal to a village, but I lacked the human currency needed for the necessary purchases.

Blanche devoured the entire bowl of fruit, her frantic pace evidence of a half-starved desperation. Once her hunger was sated her eyelids drooped; when her exhaustion eventually overcame her, she fell asleep, curled in front of the hearth, her formerly pinched features now bearing a trace of contentment.

Trapped in indecision, I watched the gentle rise and fall of her chest as she slept. Should I carry her back to the bed farther from the heat and risk waking her? Or leave her in an uncomfortable position where she might not receive adequate rest? After a moment of internal debate, I made a hasty trip to my chambers to fetch my cloak—worn on occasion for style rather than need—and draped it carefully over her.

After ensuring that the magic preserving the fireplace was secure and piling an extra log on, I left to attend to the duties that had accumulated while I tended to her. As I reached the doorway I hesitated, casting an uncertain glance back. Would she be alright on her own?

After a moment's deliberation, I decided that even residing in my ice palace was preferable to the alley where I'd found her. Her state of being caught between life and death couldn't worsen during the short time I'd be away.

Though an array of tasks awaited me—managing the temperature, preparing impending blizzards, designing frost patterns for tomorrow's windowpanes—curiosity tugged at my thoughts and distracted my focus, persistent despite my efforts to push it aside.

The echo of my footsteps reverberated through the frozen corridors, magnified by the emptiness that seemed even more vast now that someone else occupied these walls. I paused at the doorway to my studio, where blueprints for my upcoming creations and tools of my craft awaited me.

After a moment of indecision, I bypassed the studio and headed towards the library. The room crafted entirely from ice had been inspired by mortal structures, with towering shelves fashioned from frost and etched with intricate designs, complete with icicles draping artistically from the domed ceiling.

My chest swelled with pride at my handiwork, but purpose gently nudged me forward, guiding me to a shelf tucked near the back that held not rows of books, but something far more unique and intriguing.

Magic tingled at my fingertips as I traced the frosty spines until I found what I was searching for. I carefully withdrew the thin sheet of ice. At first glance it appeared entirely blank, an illusion to the untrained eye that couldn't decipher the faint etchings carved into the ice, records frozen in time.

Over the millennia of my existence, I'd discovered innovative ways to wield my winter powers beyond the mere creation of the season itself. I pressed my magic against the sheet, embedding it into the surface. My power stirred, rising gracefully to search the surrounding air, lingering on the invisible water particles that filled the atmosphere.

Water was the foundational element of my craft. Across my immortal existence I'd forged an intimate relationship with it. Through exploring all its possibilities, over the centuries I'd discovered that water retained memories of substances previously dissolved in it—an invisible preserver of history. Through painstaking practice, I'd learned to read these memories, though deciphering the complex swirl of images and sensations within a single drop added another layer of complexity to the already difficult task.

Closing my eyes, I let my thoughts fade, allowing the visions captured by my powers to fill my mind unhindered. Countless paths awaited my exploration; it took time to sift through the flashes of color and sensation to find the thread connected to the mysterious woman so that I could finally attempt to unravel the riddle of why my powers had failed to claim her.

Piece by piece, I used my magic to assemble fragments of her life like shards of broken glass in hopes of creating a mosaic that would reveal the understanding I sought. As the images coalesced, my brow furrowed at the unexpected vibrancy they conveyed—instead of the dark hues and bleak details typically associated with poverty, her memories were filled with vivid color and light, painting an impression of abundance rather than deprivation.

The elegant, haughty woman in these recollections bore a stark contrast to the starved beggar I'd rescued. I traced the magical thread through the events of her life until I stumbled upon a vision of Blanche after she'd been cast onto the streets. Yet the connection between her past and present eluded me, as if her desperation to suppress the event that had led to her downfall was strong enough to erase it even from this enchanted record.

I slowed my perusal in order to delve deeper into her memories, but before I had the chance to uncover more, her recollections abruptly ended at the moment before I'd found her in that dark alley and attempted to claim her dying soul. The pattern preserved in the stream my water magic had traced matched the instances of other mortals' deaths, confirming that her life had indeed ended that night—yet she still somehow clung to existence, leaving me no hints as to the reason for the phenomenon.

An inexplicable sensation tightened in my chest, interrupting my concentration. My magic faltered, severing the connection; no matter how much I tried, I couldn't recapture the elusive thread. The visions faded, slipping away like mist. Unconsciously I reached out, trying to grasp the evasive wisps, but they remained just out of reach.

A nagging, unfamiliar feeling tugged at my thoughts; it took me a moment to recognize it as *worry*—an emotion I'd never needed to explore in my timeless existence. My magic had always come as naturally as breathing, only for it to fail to obey me twice in a single night. The only variable that could serve as a possible explanation was *her*, a realization that only deepened the unsettling mystery surrounding this mortal.

The visions of Blanche had been transcribed onto the thin sheet of ice I still held, etched in a way that would allow me to relive them with a brush of magic. I took this sheet and a few books from the shelves, but instead of studying them in my usual nook by the window overlooking the snowy landscape, I brought them to the room where I'd left her.

I found her still sleeping, her gentle breathing filling the quiet in harmony with the crackling embers of the hearth. To my surprise, her presence brought a sense of comfort to the room, dispelling the oppressive silence that usually draped my castle.

Checking the hearth, I noticed that some of my preservative magic had faded, leaving a residue of water droplets as the ice began to melt...another concerning sign that my powers were not behaving as they should.

This troubling development took precedence over whatever secrets lay hidden in her past. I set aside the ice containing her history and instead reached for the books on magic, hoping to find the answers that eluded me. Despite my efforts to focus, my gaze repeatedly drifted back to her, as if pulled by an invisible force. Soon the information I attempted to peruse was abandoned in favor of watching her

sleep—a trivial distraction that prevented me from making any progress.

For the first time in my long existence, I questioned my course. The fading strength of my powers, the dire consequences that loomed if I failed—all seemed to pale in comparison to the enigma of this woman and the warmth she brought into my frozen world.

Who was she and what was this strange power of hers that was slowly consuming me?

## CHAPTER 5



### *Blanche*

Warmth enveloped me as I slept, a sensation so elusive that it felt like a distant memory—a longing far removed from the bitter cold that usually plagued my nights and kept true rest out of reach. But now warmth surrounded me, cradling me in a cocoon of comfort and peace.

When I finally emerged, I experienced a moment of confusion as my eyes fluttered open to soft blue darkness reflecting off shimmery white walls. Outside the windows carved from transparent ice—shinier than any polished glass—I could see the winter landscape stretching out in all directions. Snow-covered trees, frozen lakes, and gently falling snowflakes created a serene and picturesque backdrop.

Yet it wasn't the wonder of the surreal frosty surroundings that startled me, but the sight of the man sitting beside me. The crackling fire cast amber hues across his face, furrowed in concentration as he studied a shimmery, see-through book that appeared to be crafted from ice.

I blinked in disbelief, expecting the dream-like scene to dissolve and reveal the cold, unforgiving alley where I last remembered being when I lost consciousness.

But instead, I felt the comforting weight of a cloak draped over me, its rich, alluring scent drawing my attention. I wriggled my fingers no longer inhibited by the numbing cold, and stroked the soft velvet—a sensation I once took for granted but now I found mesmerizing, too vivid to be anything but real.

Beyond the warmth of the hearth and the cloak was his presence. Despite being a stranger, his company soothed the aching loneliness that seemed to have always been my constant companion, filling the emptiness with a comfort I hadn't known I could still feel.

My attention remained fixed on Frost, a quiet admiration that eventually drew his curious glance. "You're finally awake. I didn't realize mortals slept for so long."

He scooted his chair closer, allowing me a clearer view of the thin layer of snow clinging to his long white eyelashes. The urge to reach out and brush it away tugged at me, though I hesitated, still half-expecting him to vanish at my touch, proving this fantastical experience to be nothing more than a dream prior to my death.

"Where am I?" I murmured faintly as I glanced around the beautiful room so different than any of my former experience.

His brows knit together. "I've already told you—you're in my winter kingdom. Mortals are certainly forgetful."

Fragments of our earlier conversation penetrated the lingering drowsiness clouding my mind, just enough for me to piece together portions of my recollection—this man, who claimed to be the King of Winter, had rescued me from certain

death and brought me to this place of snow and ice. The circumstances were so surreal that part of me remained convinced I was dead and experiencing the afterlife.

A flicker of defiance stirred within me, swelling my chest with a familiar emotion that had long been buried by the exhaustion and shame brought on by sudden poverty. "It's not that I'm forgetful—I just find this entire situation unbelievable."

His eyebrows lifted at my sharp tone, but rather than irritation, amusement danced in his eyes. "I understand the sentiment. There are several unexplainable aspects to your situation that even you aren't aware of, but those can be discussed at another time. Though you seem much improved over your near-death state when I brought you here, you're clearly not yet recovered."

He eyed my drooping eyes, evidence that one night of sleep was insufficient to fully recover from my ordeal. Panic surged when he stood, ready to leave me to rest again. I seized the hem of his shirt. "Wait."

He paused at my raspy plea, his gaze flickering down to where I held him. Though he appeared startled and perhaps a bit unsettled by the contact, he didn't pull away, but simply waited for me to speak.

Desperately, I searched for an excuse to keep him close, but none came to mind other than the embarrassing truth. "I don't want to be alone." Heat crept into my cheeks at the admission, but I didn't retract my childish request. Only now did I realize how vast the void of loneliness had become carved into my heart until someone finally filled it, even if just momentarily.

Confusion creased his brow. "Are all humans such sentimental creatures?" Despite his puzzlement, he settled back into his seat, a trace of an indulgent smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I have some duties to attend to, but I'll remain until you fall back asleep. Once you awaken, there is much I need to discuss with you."

I nodded weakly, hating how needy I felt, yet grateful for the kindness he bestowed. I'd never fully appreciated the value of small, considerate gestures until my fall from grace, when they became the only shafts of light in my dark circumstances.

With my basic needs finally met, a stubbornness I hadn't felt for so long began to reemerge. I was half-tempted to stay awake just to keep him near, unwilling to relinquish the companionship that until this moment I hadn't realized how much I'd missed. But in the end, my heavy exhaustion emerged as victor and I found myself gently pulled back beneath the folds of sleep, surrounded not by the icy winds and drifting snow of the alley but by the soft warmth of Frost's cloak.

My first rest had been dreamless, but this time, the unfamiliar comfort and security allowed my mind to wander. Memories flitted in and out of my consciousness before settling on a seemingly insignificant moment—a morning when I'd woken up late in my grand canopy bed, the scent of bacon and eggs mingling with the sound of a crackling fire. Such a simple reminiscence—a rare moment of pure contentment, free from the burdens that would later consume my life—yet one I cherished more than all the lost glamour.

As I drifted through that recollection, portions of it seemed to drift into my present reality, for my present comfort was startlingly similar. The absence of the icy prickles that usually tormented my exposed skin startled me, jolting me awake with a gasp.

The fading light from when I'd drifted off had been brushed away by the bright morning sunlight filling the room, illuminating the intricate details that the night

and my drowsiness had blurred. I struggled to sit up to better look around. Frost was nowhere to be seen, but on the empty chair beside me, he'd left a woolen dress that looked far warmer than my meager rags. The fabric caressed my cheek as I gingerly cradled the outfit close. The faded brown design was far too simple and worn to be considered fashionable, but I had long since stopped caring about such trivial things.

After ensuring I was truly alone, I cautiously slipped out from beneath Frost's cloak. The air was warmer within the reach of the hearth, but the lingering frostiness in the air nearly caused me to take refuge back beneath the blanket I'd just escaped.

I dressed as quickly as my still stiffened limbs allowed before wrapping Frost's cloak back around my shoulders and tiptoeing to the door, tugging on the smooth, frosty handle to peer into the corridor. Though the hallway was absent of my mysterious host, instead I was greeted by his exquisite craftsmanship—a vision of winter wonder that left me breathless.

I took a reverent step before pausing to turn in a slow circle and take in the surrounding splendor. The interior was a labyrinth of ice corridors and chambers, each more awe-inspiring than the last. The translucent walls glowed with a soft, bluish hue, casting an ethereal light throughout the space. The polished floors beneath my feet mirrored the ambient light, creating the illusion of walking on a frozen lake.

Exploring the ice castle felt like stepping into a frozen dream, where every corner and corridor held a new marvel sculpted by winter's hand. The narrow, winding passageways heightened the sense of mystery and anticipation, their walls adorned with frost patterns that seemed to shift and change as I explored. Occasionally, I caught glimpses of the snowy landscape beyond through the clear ice windows, their panes offering a fleeting connection to the outside world.

Each room served as a testament to the artistry of its creation. As I ventured deeper into the castle, I encountered a series of chambers, each more captivating than the last. Some rooms were adorned with ice sculptures depicting scenes of winter folklore and mythical beings, so intricately carved they seemed ready to spring to life at any moment.

Grand halls with vaulted ceilings were supported by columns resembling the trunks of ancient trees, their branches intertwining to form delicate arches. Frosty lacework adorned their surfaces, while massive ice chandeliers hung overhead, their frozen crystals refracting light into a spectrum of colors that danced across the glistening walls.

At the heart of the castle lay a majestic throne room, dominated by a magnificent ice throne atop a raised platform. I stepped closer to see that the throne was carved with exquisite detail, featuring symbols and motifs that told stories of winter's majesty and the power of the cold. As I approached, the air grew even colder, a reminder of the elemental force that had crafted this enchanting palace.

Exploring the ice castle was an experience that captivated all my senses—the soft echo of my footsteps in the vast halls, the sight of light playing across the icy surfaces, and the crisp, clean scent of frozen air all combined to create a profound sense of awe and wonder. It was a place where the beauty and magic of winter were on full display, inviting me to lose myself in their crystalline splendor.

As I wandered through each room, I was struck by how they mirrored those of my old manor except these had been caressed by winter's brushstroke. The beauty was otherworldly—if heaven were a cold place, I might have believed I'd found myself there...even as my past whispered that I was unworthy of such a heavenly



paradise.

My explorations eventually led me to a room where the light glistening through the partially ajar door beckoned me to peer inside. The space beyond was an extension of this winter wonderland, a studio unlike any I'd ever seen. The walls were lined with detailed sketches of snowflakes in infinite varieties, each more intricate than the last. Snowflakes fell gracefully from the ceiling in delicate, orchestrated waltzes, their movements synchronized as if guided by an unseen conductor. An ice-crafted gramophone played a hauntingly beautiful tune, the melody reminiscent of the whispering winds of winter.

I stood entranced for several moments before a movement caught my eye. Frost himself sat hunched over a workbench, a basket of freshly created snowflakes at his feet. I drew closer, captivated by the design he was meticulously shaping. Curious, I watched as he used the curved blade of a tiny silver knife to craft an intricate pattern in a snowflake the size of his hand, pausing on occasion to consult a drawing. A nearby candle flickered, not from an ordinary flame but from an enchanted blue light that cast a heatless borealis of color across the room, illuminating his handsome features. A flutter of attraction stirred in my chest, startling me but also infusing me with a warmth entirely new and different from anything I'd ever experienced.

At the sound of my quiet footsteps, he paused and glanced over his shoulder. "Ah, you're awake." He set aside his carving tools in a small basket woven of ice strands and swiveled in his seat to face me more fully. "I was planning on checking on you when I finished here, but I wasn't sure if you'd had enough rest."

He himself showed no sign of fatigue, exuding an air of timelessness, as if both he and this castle had existed long before the world was formed, his youthful physique frozen in time.

I glanced around in awe. "Did you truly create such a marvelous place?"

A faint smile touched his lips. "I've had eternity to carve out every detail." Pride tinged his otherwise matter-of-fact tone. "This is my studio, where I create winter. Right now I'm preparing several upcoming blizzards."

The ever-present doubt in my mind stirred, but it was becoming harder to hold onto it after the wondrous feats of architecture I'd just explored in his ice castle and the evidence of his creation process before me. "Such a claim still feels so surreal," I admitted, stretching out my palm to catch a snowflake.

He shrugged, seemingly unbothered by my skepticism. "It's of no concern to me whether or not you believe; your acknowledgment or lack thereof cannot change my role nor the powers I possess."

Once upon a time I might have believed without question, but after all I had endured, I wasn't sure if my heart was even capable of the childlike faith I once treasured. Yet despite the magic that had been absent from my life, I still yearned to recapture that belief in its existence.

As if his power allowed him to sense my unspoken wish, Frost caused magic to shimmer against his palm, directing it towards the snowflake he had been carving. I watched in astonishment as a single caress of his power caused the snowflake to shrink. He carefully placed it in a basket with the others, each one destined for one of the future storms scheduled on the small desk calendar beside him. Then he cast me a mischievous smirk, as if daring me to deny what I'd just witnessed.

Pride kept me from admitting my mistaken assumption, so I averted my gaze to take in the spectacular room, nervously fiddling with the fabric of the new skirt he'd procured for me. His eyes followed my movements, and I gratefully seized the opportunity to change the subject.

"Thank you for the clothes." The words emerged uncertainly, my lips unaccustomed to expressing gratitude. Poverty had hardened me, making it difficult to be thankful for anything after everything had been stripped away.

His gaze flickered over the outfit he had provided and he gave a nod of satisfaction. "It appears to fit. You're fortunate to be a similar size to the woman whose clothes I procured from her clothesline after she froze to death last night."

My breath caught in my throat and I shrank inside the suddenly less comfortable clothes. "Did you take her soul?"

He nodded, seemingly unconcerned by the horror in my voice at such a shocking revelation. "Naturally. Souls don't just wander off on their own—all the phenomena in this world are carefully orchestrated by magical beings behind the scenes."

Though his explanation possessed a strange logic, a shiver tiptoed up my spine. "I used to read about the King of Winter in my book of legends—according to its descriptions, you're a being who only creates winter, not one who acts as a grim reaper."

"You're correct in assuming I possess no such role," he said. "I take no part in the actual death of any of the people whose souls I take. And as the embodiment of Winter, I can only claim souls that fall under its jurisdiction—those who freeze within the elements I create. Each acquired soul extends my life, rendering me immortal thanks to the countless I've collected throughout eternity. I've never failed to extract a soul...until yours. At first, I feared there was something wrong with my powers, but I had no trouble acquiring the souls I collected last night; it was a particularly cold night, so there were several."

His voice remained matter-of-fact, but there was a fleeting shadow of something else in his eyes—regret, perhaps—before his expression smoothed into neutrality. Despite the grim duty he spoke of, that brief flicker of emotion suggested there was more to him than the coldness of his role.

His brow furrowed as he pondered the unresolved puzzle, one he had mentioned before but which took on a new significance now that exhaustion no longer clouded my thoughts.

"You mentioned I'm currently between life and death. What does that mean?" I twisted the cuff of my brown sleeve, dropping my eyes as I waited for his answer.

"I'm admittedly not certain," he confessed. "I was studying the matter when you first awoke."

I recalled the moment he referred to, the memory deepening the implications of his words. My eyes flew upward in alarm. "You're trying to figure out how to kill me." The realization chilled me more than the icy air ever could.

His long hesitation confirmed my worst fears. Seeing my shock, he quickly clarified, "Technically, I'm not the one killing you; the only death that comes by my hand is through the winter I create. I'm simply duty-bound to find a way to finish the process that should have concluded in the alley where I found you."

To my mind, dying from the cold he created still placed the blame squarely at his feet. I wanted to argue, but I knew it was a pointless technicality—his goal of obtaining my soul was the same, regardless of the details.

I was ashamed to admit how often, in the depths of my misery, I had wished for death—anything to escape a life measured not by happiness but by a constant, cold struggle. But now, faced with the reality of my mortality, a deep, long-buried desire stirred within me.

*I don't want to die.*

At that desperate wish, a spark of shimmering light ignited above my heart. Frost extended his hand, capturing the light on his fingertip like one might catch a falling snowflake. He examined it closely, his vivid blue eyes widening. “This is magic.”

The doubt I had only just managed to suppress resurged and I stepped back, shaking my head. “It can’t be. As a human, it’s impossible for me to possess magic.”

“True,” he conceded. “But while you’re in this state—neither dead nor truly alive—you’re not exactly *mortal* anymore. Quite the puzzle.” By the excitement lighting his eyes, this riddle intrigued him deeply. The spark of magic illuminated his already striking features, quickening the flutter in my chest.

He continued to study it, as if that tiny glimmer held all the secrets of my heart—secrets I likely didn’t even know existed. “Where did it come from?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Magic exists all around us, even when we don’t recognize it. You must have given voice to words that acted as a form of a spell.” His tone was thoughtful, as if piecing together an enigma.

I considered his theory as I stared at the glistening light birthed from my realization that I wasn’t ready to die. It seemed that even when everything else was lost, a part of me had clung to the hope that there was still something worth living for. This newfound desire made me hesitant to ask him about his progress in completing my death. I’d never struggled to speak my mind before, but whatever forthrightness I’d once possessed seemed to have vanished along with my previous privilege.

Despite the limbo trapping my soul, my stomach growled, a stark reminder that I was still physically bound to this world. Frost blinked, as if momentarily forgetting that a human needed more sustenance than the bowl of winter fruit he’d given me earlier.

He led me through the frozen corridors to a vast icy dining hall, where he awkwardly handed me a plate of fish, shyly admitting he’d caught it from a nearby frozen river. I watched the steam rise in misty curls, almost afraid to look away from the first real meal I’d had in what felt like ages, as though it might disappear if I did. Whatever his ultimate purpose for my soul, he at least possessed enough kindness to see to my basic needs while I lived here.

I took a tentative bite. The flavor was subtle, lacking the rich seasonings I once enjoyed in the dishes prepared by my highly trained chef, yet it was somehow the most delicious thing I’d ever tasted, second only to the winter fruit Frost had given me earlier.

He fidgeted, his eyes filled with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. “Is it... alright? I’ve never prepared mortal food before and had to summon a portal to visit a nearby village to see how it’s done.”

Despite my lingering wariness, my heart swelled to find myself the object of anyone’s consideration after the isolation that had defined my life for so long. While my servants in my former life of luxury had done everything I asked, it had never been out of the simple desire to bring me pleasure. Overcome with emotion, I simply nodded, noting the endearing way his shoulders sagged with relief at my response, as though he truly cared about my opinion.

As I ate, the sensations I once took for granted washed over me—the texture and taste of the food as it danced on my tongue, the smell of the world after a fresh snowfall, even the chill of the air—all reminders that I was still alive. I wanted to embrace whatever life I had left, in whatever form it might take.

This desire, unhindered by the uncertainty clogging my throat, allowed me to at last voice my desperate question. “Have you discovered the reason why my soul appears to be lingering?”

He looked up from his place on the other side of the table, where he’d been watching me eat with curious fascination. He blinked hastily, as if my voice had summoned his thoughts from somewhere far away. “There are many possibilities, the most likely being that something is keeping you here. We’ll have to experiment to discover what it is, but once we determine the cause, I should be able to release you.”

*What if I don’t want my soul to be released?*

The thought struck me with surprising intensity. Yet despite that intense desire, I hesitated at the thought of returning to the life I’d left behind...nothing awaited me there save the mere illusion of *living*, and the sensations I was experiencing now gave me a longing for a life of more meaning than just survival. But I was afraid to voice these reservations to a man who for all his show of care was still very much a magical stranger responsible not only for the season I loathed, but for ensuring that in the end I froze to death...leaving me very little reason to trust him.

As I finished the last bite of fish, I glanced up to find Frost watching me with an intensity that made me pause. His vivid blue eyes, so full of mystery and unreadable emotions, met mine across the table. He wasn’t eating—hadn’t even so much as touched any food since we’d sat down. The thought unsettled me, and before I could stop myself, the question slipped out.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

He blinked, as if the idea hadn’t occurred to him. “I don’t need to eat, not the way mortals do.”

His casual tone did little to ease my discomfort. If he didn’t need to eat, then how did he exist in this frozen realm, untouched by the needs that bound me to life? I wanted to ask him about his habits, the years he’d lived, and the secrets he must have gathered through countless winters.

The questions hung on the tip of my tongue, but apprehension held me back—the fear of getting closer to someone who, despite his current kindness, might not have my best interests at heart when his ultimate goal was still to claim my soul.

I brushed a finger along the edge of the tablecloth—a wonder of delicate frost as intricate as any of his snowflakes—trying to steady myself. The array of sensations I was currently experiencing made it impossible to fathom—the food’s taste, the sensation of warmth, and the weariness that pulled at my eyelids felt all too real. Yet if I was currently trapped in a state so near death, how was I able to experience these things? Was it all a cruel illusion to remind me of what I’d lost along with my life?

Perhaps it was simply because the human experience was all I’d ever known, so tangible that even in this liminal state, my mind and body clung to it. The thought left me unsettled, as if the very nature of my existence was slipping through my fingers.

## CHAPTER 6



My uncertainty deepened as I reluctantly followed Frost through the castle, a confusing labyrinth of directions whose navigation eventually ascended a winding staircase within one of the turrets. Apprehension weighed my steps, each heavier than the last. When we finally reached the top, an empty room awaited us, bathed in the soft light of the approaching sunrise; glimmers of dawn danced across the icy floor, casting an ethereal glow.

Curiosity momentarily eclipsed my reservations. “What is this place?” The room didn’t seem like the kind of place where Frost would complete the freezing process that for whatever reason had been miraculously paused...unless he intended to set me back on death’s fatal course by pushing me from the balcony.

I hovered in the doorway, afraid to venture any further into the mysterious room. Upon noticing where apprehension had halted my footsteps Frost paused and turned back to me, his expression softened by an unspoken understanding. He extended his hand toward me, a silent invitation to trust him.

I wavered, caught between fear and the faint stirrings of hope. I slowly placed my hand in his. His touch was cold, as expected, but the way his fingers gently encircled mine offered a surprising warmth. With cautious steps, I let him guide me over the threshold, venturing into the mysterious room.

“This is the viewing room,” Frost explained, his tone tinged with an undercurrent of concern. “I wondered if revisiting your life might help us uncover why your soul is trapped in this state of in-between.”

A wave of trepidation washed over me, eclipsing the fleeting awe I’d felt at the mention of this mysterious power. Reflecting over one’s life was often associated with someone’s final moments before death, a grim confirmation of the fear I didn’t want to face...not to mention that I would derive no pleasure from viewing the downward spiral of my life as luxury gave way to misery.

“Is there really no way to reverse it?” I asked, my voice barely holding steady.

He shook his head, his expression somber. “Once the process has begun there’s nothing I can do to stop it. I can only claim your soul to allow you to finally enter eternal rest. I’m sorry.”

His dreaded pronouncement settled over me with heavy finality. *I’m going to die.* The realization cinched my chest with a helplessness unlike anything I’d ever felt, different than the hopelessness that had plagued my poverty-stricken life. While those circumstances had been dire, there had always been the chance that each new day might bring some change...something I hadn’t truly appreciated until I’d run out of dawns to look forward to.

Until now, my constant fight for survival had suppressed the regrets I’d long buried, dismissing them as distractions from my immediate struggle. But now faced with the inevitability of my death, those regrets surged sharply to the surface,

overwhelming me with their weight. They were no longer just passing shadows, but the shattered remnants of dreams that would forever remain unfulfilled.

I yanked my hand from his grasp and snapped, anger lacing my words. “I refuse to let you toy with what’s left of my life at your whim.”

Regret etched his expression, a genuine empathy that felt hollow coming from an immortal man who could never truly grasp the concept of death...an irony made more painful knowing that acquiring my soul would only extend his own endless existence.

“I’m not trying to force you to move on out of cruelty. I fear what might happen to your soul if you linger in this transitionary realm for too long.” His vivid blue eyes locked onto mine, and for a moment I lost myself in the depth of his concern. It chipped away at the defenses I’d built around my frozen heart, just enough for his words to seep through.

My old stubbornness would have refused to let go of my frustration so easily, but time and weariness had weakened my resolve. Reluctantly, I allowed him to take my hand again and lead me farther into the room. Curiosity guided my compliance, the secret longing to see the past I’d tried to forget—a past that felt like a distant dream, yet still held wounds that I knew for all my pretending hadn’t fully healed.

Frost led me to the center of the frozen chamber, where he summoned a glistening ball of cerulean light. Fascination allowed me to momentarily forget my apprehension as I watched the magic dancing in his hands, effortlessly mingling with the moisture in the air until snowflakes began to form, swirling in a glistening curtain of white.

He molded the snow into a large, smooth ball and extended it towards me. “Your touch will complete the spell.”

I hesitated, my heart pounding in my chest, before tentatively reaching out and letting my fingertip brush the surface of the snowball. The coldness kissed my skin, and with that touch the snowball began to swirl like the mist within a crystal ball. It rose gracefully into the air, floating over the balcony railing before exploding into a shower of glittering snowflakes, like fireworks against the dawn.

Instead of dazzling the approaching night with glistening color, the sky transformed into a stage, where an image began to take shape like a grand theatrical performance. The memories unfurled with the grace of a well-rehearsed play, the scene set with a soft, nostalgic glow. As if drawn by an unseen director, fragments of the past came alive, each one taking its place in an intricate tapestry of time.

It was a show unlike anything I’d ever seen in a theater, as if my memories had been extracted and projected across the sunrise. Each recollection felt both intimately familiar and strangely distant, as though I were merely an outside observer watching a life that no longer felt like my own.

The curtain rose on a tender, sepia-toned scene before my earliest recollections, starting with my birth into what should have been a fairytale, before my life eventually veered drastically off course. I watched as a young child grew up with every comfort one could imagine, my only childish concerns being how to spend my playtime, finding a way out of my lessons, and causing mischief for my governess and the servants charged with tending to me.

Though I recognized a younger version of myself in this little girl, that time seemed so distant it no longer felt like me, but as though I watched the life of some carefree stranger. I could no longer relate to someone so accustomed to always having enough to eat and enjoying the warmth and security of shelter—luxuries I had once taken for granted, a thought that now felt unsettling.

The entire first part of my timeline drifted by without anything noteworthy to distinguish it. I cast a sideways glance at Frost, curious about his thoughts on my life compared to the countless others he had undoubtedly witnessed throughout his existence. I expected to see the same shame I felt towards my previous apathy mirrored in his expression, but he only looked thoughtful—almost bored, if not for the slight furrow in his brow that hinted at his deep concentration.

Eventually, he sensed my stare and met my gaze. He lifted his eyebrows in a silent question. “I confess I still don’t understand the purpose of viewing such an insignificant life,” I admitted.

His brows rose further in clear surprise. “You don’t deem your own life significant? My job will become much more difficult if even you cannot even see its purpose. A human life is composed of more than just events, each moment bound by threads of meaning whose ripple effect extends beyond how it might initially appear.”

It took me a moment to understand his analogy. “Similar to how each beautiful piece of embroidery has a tangle of messy threads hidden beneath the surface?”

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly, the shadow of a smile. “Exactly. There is a snag somewhere within this intricate tapestry that is holding your soul back. I’m hoping that by studying your life, I can locate the area that needs to be untangled so that I can set your soul free.”

Yet it was those very knotted threads that kept me tethered to life. I had never had a chance to consider what might lie beyond the life I knew, only that the uncertainty shrouding the path leading to this unknown destination was terrifying.

I had no answer beyond the protests I longed to give, but thankfully he didn’t seem to be expecting one. He returned his attention to my unfolding memories. “This snag is likely hidden in a place that, on the surface, seems unremarkable, but which altered your life in unimaginable ways.”

I could only think of one such event, and it was not one masked beneath the guise of the ordinary. But though he had undoubtedly noticed the contrast between the abundance of my early years and the squalor that marked the end of my life, he waited patiently to witness for himself what had happened in order to decipher the significances and connections my untrained eye couldn’t see.

He remained silent, offering no further comment or reaction as we watched the memories unfold against the now velvety night sky until a seemingly insignificant memory appeared across the sky’s backdrop. His entire demeanor shifted and he jolted, leaning forward with a sudden intensity that beckoned my puzzled gaze.

“What is it?” I asked.

He didn’t immediately answer, but by the astonishment widening his eyes something in this particular recollection had struck him deeply. I shifted my attention to the memory in question—a mundane morning from my childhood when I’d become fascinated by the frost patterns decorating my bedroom windowpanes, oblivious then to the fact that the cold which created such beauty for me to admire would one day bring me endless torment when I couldn’t find shelter from the winter...and would most likely bring about my eventual demise.

“I used to be mesmerized by the different patterns etched into the glass,” I explained in hopes of making sense of his reaction. “It was just a childish whimsy that I eventually grew out of.”

He pursed his lips, saying nothing, his thoughts clearly far away. A series of other mundane moments from my early years played across the stage of reminiscence; it wasn’t until much later when the final memories of my childhood were nearing their conclusion that he finally spoke.



“I’m beginning to wonder if there are multiple regrets holding you back, beginning from your earliest memories.”

His words tore my attention away from another memory—this one of an embarrassing tantrum I’d thrown over my governess’ insistence that I study when I wanted to try out my new paint set. I gaped at him, incredulous. “What do you mean? My childhood was the best part of my life.”

His forehead furrowed. “Truly? You seemed to possess everything but genuine happiness.” He tipped his head towards the memory currently on display—a younger version of me, pouting and sullen over some minor disappointment. “I’ve observed many things throughout this showcase, but joy hasn’t been one of them.”

It wasn’t until he pointed it out that I began to see the shadows that marred what I’d once considered an ideal childhood. Holidays spent alone around a pine tree decorated with glistening candles and colored ornaments; a vast feast spread across a table, with every chair empty except for my own; endless afternoons with no company but the servants who maintained a careful distance.

The memories played out one after another. Watching them all unfold at once made me painfully aware of my parents’ scarce presence in my life, as absent in my memories as they’d been in reality. They had provided every luxury imaginable in our manor, yet nothing by way of attention or affection.

A foreign feeling tugged at my heart, something I struggled to identify until I recognized it as an aching loneliness I had never fully acknowledged—an emotion I had known the word for but never fully understood until this moment. Now I couldn’t escape its unsettling reach as it prickled my heart, allowing me to become familiar enough with the emotion that I could recognize a fleeting glimpse of it in Frost’s own expression before it faded.

As each memory played out, my apprehension grew. With every passing minute, we drew closer to the event I dreaded most, the moment that had haunted me ever since it had occurred. I wanted nothing more than to stop the performance to prevent myself from reliving the nightmare that had haunted me ever since its occurrence, or at the very least to shield it from Frost’s view.

Yet the memories continued to unfold beyond my control, inching ever closer to the worst event of my life. My fingers slipped into my pocket to trace the outline of the broken door knocker I’d carried since that day, gripping it for extra strength.

But the moment I feared never came. Instead, we were distracted by its prelude—an event that, at the time, I hadn’t realized would set the stage for the revenge fate would eventually seek. It happened on what seemed like an ordinary day, during what would be my last winter spent in comfort rather than suffering.

During this snapshot of the past, I glided down the street, the very picture of wealth and privilege—wrapped in a tailored fur coat that exuded opulence, a hat with a plume of feathers that sat perfectly atop my meticulously styled hair, and adorned with jewels that glistened in the light cast from the street lamps.

As I approached an intersection, a small group of street urchins huddled by the corner, their ragged clothes and hopeful eyes a stark contrast to my refined appearance. They clambered around me, their faces pinched with cold and hunger, their small hands extended for alms. Their voices barely rose above the din of the bustling streets, but their desperation was unmistakable, heart-wrenching pleas that failed to penetrate my hardened heart.

Instead, I recoiled from their reach, fearful they might soil my elegant clothes with their filthy hands. My gaze was as cold as the frost on the windows that had once fascinated me. I looked down at the children with practiced indifference before I swept past them without a second glance, my deliberate, unhurried steps clicking

against the cobblestones in a sound that echoed with finality, leaving the unfortunate children behind in the cold.

Unfortunately this scene was more than a single event—it was a deeply rooted attitude that had played out countless times before, a pattern of cold detachment that had shaped the course of my life, one I now greatly regretted.

They had watched me disappear into the crowd, their hopeful expressions fading into resignation. At the time I'd deemed them a nuisance, but now glimpsing their gaunt expressions was like peering into a mirror—the thin cheeks sunken from lack of food, the haunched shoulders burdened by the weight of hopelessness, the eyes devoid of life and faith in the future. Their world had once seemed so far removed from mine, yet now it was my everyday reality...at least until the strange, dreamlike events that had led me here.

Back then, poverty was a concept beyond the understanding of the fleeting luxury I'd done nothing to earn but felt I wholly deserved. The question haunted me almost as much as the memory itself. Reliving it now, I could feel the same cold indifference that had been my truth in that moment. In my misguided sense of superiority I'd believed then that the less fortunate deserved their fate, just as I believed I deserved my privilege—completely unaware of how fragile and fleeting it truly was until it was too late.

There was a deep part of me that I didn't want to acknowledge that feared I had deserved to freeze to death in that abandoned alley. If I had understood the poverty those stricken urchins endured, would anything have been different without karma's manipulation behind the scenes?

Such a dismissive attitude was one I had encountered countless times since living on the streets. Only now, I found myself on the receiving end—until Frost, whether sincere in his motives for doing so or not, had been the first to extend a glimmer of mercy. That gesture had caused a piece of my hardened heart to break away beyond my control to extend toward the first being I'd ever wanted to give any portion of it to.

Anxious about Frost's reaction to witnessing my coldhearted cruelty, I stole a tentative glance at him. The scene had finally cracked the stoic mask he had worn throughout most of my recollections, presently showcasing lavish balls, parties, and my relentless pursuit of eligible bachelors that now made me uncomfortable to relive. His expression was no longer impassive but instead filled with a horror I would give anything not to have directed at me.

The memories suddenly ceased. It took me a moment to realize that the magic bringing them to life had been abruptly severed. I felt a mix of relief that I wouldn't be forced to relive the day that had changed my life, and sinking dread at the realization that Frost likely couldn't bear to see another moment of the life of such a horrible person.

My shoulders tensed as I braced myself for his disgust or even wrath, but only his raw shock crowded the unsettling silence that had descended around us. Eventually, it was punctuated by his sharp gasps as he fought for air, seizing handfuls of shaky breaths as if his immortality had somehow been threatened.

Before I could speak, he turned and walked briskly past me, descending the twisting steps without a single glance back, as if he could no longer bear to look at me...let alone claim my tainted soul.

## CHAPTER 7



### *Frost*

My immortality was not measured simply by the endless years that blended together like minutes across the expanse of forever, but by the souls I gathered. As the Winter King, I existed apart from the mortals whose lives were touched by the beauty of my magic. Other than the rare moments I observed them, my own world intersected with theirs only when duty called, necessitating that I collect the souls claimed by winter.

In the act of retrieving a soul, I would catch snippets of each person's life—a fleeting glimpse into their existence that both intrigued me and gave me the occasional twinge of dissatisfaction, as though I was missing something.

While I possessed little interest in living a mortal existence, I was fascinated by their customs and especially by the bonds they formed with each other, such a contrast to the quiet solitude draping my vast, empty halls whose silence only amplified the sense of isolation that weighed more on my soul with each passing century.

I observed these snippets primarily out of respect for the dead—an unspoken gratitude that their souls would extend my own immortality—yet I sometimes found myself lingering over their memories, replaying their simple acts of love. In comparison to mine, their lives were mundane and made little impact on the world, their brief stays on the earth mere drops in the vast ocean of my eternity...and yet I enjoyed watching how they chose to use their few days, as I might enjoy reading a fictional tale.

I expected Blanche's life would evoke similar detached interest, but for the first time I found myself captivated, unable to look away as her chronicle unfolded against the backdrop of the velvety night. It wasn't her noble lineage or her wealthy upbringing that drew me in, and aside from that background her life was no more extraordinary than the others I'd collected over the eons. Yet something about her stirred my heart from its usual dormancy.

It wasn't until her memories progressed through her entire childhood to reach a particular autumn night on the cusp of winter that I finally understood the inexplicable connection that bound me to this mortal woman like an invisible thread.

She was a girl of privilege, young enough to maintain the innocence that allowed her to find joy in something as seemingly insignificant as the frosted patterns I etched into her bedroom window each morning. While she wasn't the first mortal to notice my efforts, her fascination extended beyond a fleeting appreciation to become enthralled with each new design, her wonder lighting up her face with

every discovery.

But it was more than just her delight in my frosted windowpanes that bound us. There was something deeper, a mystery I had never been able to solve before age caused her to eventually lose interest in my creations, and I never saw her again... until now.

I felt my breath catch as the young Blanche appeared in the memory, her eyes bright with excitement upon waking to discover yet another frost pattern I had carefully crafted, a moment that in my span of eternity felt like only yesterday. I instinctively leaned closer, as if my proximity to the magical vision illuminating her recollections could transport back in time to those moments.

*It couldn't be.*

Yet the evidence unfolded before me, mingling with my own memories until they aligned perfectly with hers—her gasp of delight at the flower patterns, the way the tip of her nose brushed against the cool glass as she leaned closer, and the reverent brush of her fingertips as she traced each frosty petal.

The image resurrected feelings I had long thought forgotten—my careful planning of each design, the anticipation of her reaction, the warmth that her childlike joy brought to my cold heart. Even as those feelings and memories faded with time, my subconscious had recognized her, even when my mind had not, finally solving at least one of my mysteries: the true reason I'd chosen to rescue a mere human and brought her to the realm where mortals did not belong.

The tender moment had swiftly been overshadowed by the chilling revelation that followed—the memory of the poor street urchins Blanche had heartlessly turned away. This event intertwined with one of my own, one that haunted me long after it occurred. Shortly after her display of cruelty I had been summoned to a dark alley, an unforgiving place shrouded in an eerie silence that seemed to press down on everything.

The wind howled through the narrow passage and the harsh glow of flickering streetlights barely cut through the darkness, casting long, distorted shadows across the slick, icy ground. At first, the figures appeared as indistinct shapes, barely distinguishable from the grime around them. But as I drew closer, the terrible truth became clear.

The children lay motionless, their small bodies half-buried under a cruel blanket of snow and ice, huddled together in a final, desperate attempt for warmth before the cold had claimed them, tragically snuffing out their young lives. The frost had settled over them like a shroud, transforming them into pale, lifeless sculptures. Their clothes—thin and inadequate against the biting cold—were coated with frost, the once-bright colors dulled by winter's icy grip.

Their faces, visible in small gaps between the snow, were etched with a haunting stillness. The cold had claimed them completely, turning their skin a ghastly shade of blue and grey. The natural sounds of childish voices had been replaced with only the ghostly whine of the frigid wind that shifted the snow over the corpses, a grim reminder of winter's unforgiving power.

The somber scene had been powerful enough to stir even my frozen heart. As the Winter King, I was supposed to be impartial to the tragedies that befell mortals, my emotions as cold and unyielding as the season I ruled. Yet that night, sadness that had no place in my role consumed me, threatening to disrupt my duties. The tragedy of those children—so close to the warmth of the village yet so tragically far from its comforts—left an indelible mark on my immortal soul, a harsh reminder of what the beauty I created was capable of.

Unexpectedly encountering the faces of the children whose death still haunted me woven through the chronicle of Blanche's life shattered my usual mask of stoicism. My heart wrenched as the feelings I had fought to suppress surged to the surface. I never imagined that such a terrible memory would be so intricately linked with the first mortal I had ever truly connected with, the one that I was finding more intriguing by the moment.

I couldn't reconcile the innocent young girl who delighted in my frost creations with the coldhearted woman whose willful negligence had contributed to those children's deaths. I might not have believed it if I hadn't witnessed the memory myself; but magic, no matter how much I wished otherwise, could not lie.

The horrific realization rendered me incapable of continuing to watch Blanche's life unfold. I cut the magic short and fled down the stairs, desperate to escape the overwhelming torrent of emotions swirling within me like a blizzard. But no matter how fast I ran, I couldn't outrun them. They followed me, storming through my mind, foreign and incomprehensible.

Even when I sought refuge in a secluded section of my castle and attempted to distract myself with my usual preparations for winter I found no solace. My thoughts, usually so focused and meticulous, were scattered. The intricate patterns I would have normally crafted with care seemed dull and lifeless, my hands moving through the motions without their usual precision or passion. I crumpled a misshapen snowflake in my fist—mashing it together with several other failures into a hard crystal sphere—and formed a fresh sheet of ice, attempting to carve it with trembling fingers.

As I tried to lose myself in the process, memories of Blanche's life kept intruding, the image of her as a child blurring with the cold indifference of the woman she had become. The frost I created seemed less like art and more like a bitter reminder of the lives it had claimed. Every detail I tried to focus on brought me back to that alley, to the children I had found, and to the terrible connection between them and Blanche.

Time usually held little meaning for me, but as I heard the soft patter of Blanche's increasingly familiar footsteps, I instinctively knew it had been nearly four hours since I'd last seen her. A mere blink of my existence, but with her numbered days it likely seemed much longer to her.

When she appeared, a wave of unexpected compassion washed over me. Despite the anger and confusion that had gripped me earlier, I now saw her as a victim of circumstances—much like the street urchins were victims of a different tragedy. Viewing Blanche's life had helped me realize that she had never known true compassion, a product of her upbringing in her treatment of others. While she still held responsibility for her actions, my heart tugged in pity at the realization that she had been starved of love, just as cruelly as the children she'd ignored had been starved of food.

Blanche stepped into the room softly, pausing in the doorway, her widened eyes taking in the haphazard piles that had accumulated during my hours of distracted creation. She picked up one of the balls of ice, turning it over in her hands before her questioning gaze met mine. "A hailstone?"

I startled, only now realizing how drastically I'd veered off course from my initial intention to prepare for a gentle snowfall. "I originally meant to create snowflakes...but it appears my creativity has a mind of its own."

The corner of her lips twitched, as if trying to remember how to smile after having forgotten how. "It appears the mystery of one natural phenomenon has been solved: every winter storm is at the mercy of your mood." Her humor managed to

cut through the tension that thickened the frosty air.

"I'm not in a bad mood." But my hardened tone contradicted my insistence, as did the piles of ice, the result of my unfocused efforts—hailstones that would likely lead to unexpected and severe storms in several unfortunate villages.

She bit her lip. "Is it my fault?"

Her unexpected question caught me off guard, lifting me briefly from my cloud of gloom. "Why would my current preference for hail be your fault?"

She shifted uneasily, her gaze dropping to the floor as she answered. "Because of...what you witnessed from my life. You know now that you're wasting your effort to help someone who doesn't deserve it—there's no value in extending your life by obtaining a tainted soul." Remorse clouded her grey eyes, such a stark contrast to the superior disdain she'd exhibited towards the urchins in her memories.

"The state of the souls I claim has no bearing on the amount of life they give me; only the years they spent living add to my own."

As I spoke I realized this wasn't entirely true—there was something about *her* soul in particular that stirred mine in a way no other human's had, an influence that extended beyond the frosted windowpanes I had once created for her.

That connection, though fragile in the face of her indifference towards the urchins, was still stronger than the disappointment I felt. Something deeper existed between us; I wanted to explore whatever it was, even as a part of me feared doing so.

Her brow furrowed. "Then why did you leave so suddenly? It was as if you could no longer bear to watch the life of someone so horrible."

Deep down, I knew the real reason I had prematurely cut off the memories of her life wasn't due to her icy behavior but rather my impending dread of witnessing the course that led to her inevitable end—a ridiculous reaction considering she was already trapped in death's clutches, a fate no amount of magic could rescue her from.

My heart gave a strange twinge that I hastily tried to suppress. *I have no reason to feel this way about a mere mortal.*

The power I had always relied upon couldn't provide an answer to this most perplexing riddle, nor could I find it in the decorative carvings and frosty murals adorning the icy walls—a chronicle of my existence that spanned back to the creation of time itself. For all my magical knowledge, nothing had prepared me for this complex, bewildering relationship with the mortal whose soul was proving so difficult to obtain.

She must have mistaken my extended silence for confirmation of her fears. Her composure faltered. "With what you witnessed in my treatment of the less fortunate, it's no wonder fate caused my life to turn out the way it did." She gave a self-deprecating, hollow laugh that belied the despair paling her expression.

I carefully considered my next words. "If fate were truly the determiner of one's destiny, then the bad would always be punished and the good rewarded. But the human experience is far more complex than that."

Confusion puckered her brow. "Then why else would I find myself in the very position I once belittled others for, if not as cosmic repayment for what I've done?"

Unfortunately I had no answer to give. While I'd been able to gather several clues from her recollections I'd seen so far, I'd ended the showcase before figuring out what regret held her back or the event that had caused her life to take such a drastic turn...though by the agony clouding her eyes, I could guess that her cruel actions weighed heavily upon her soul, preventing her from forgiving herself to

move forward. Whether that regret was what held her soul captive or something else, with so little time left there was no sense in wasting our limited moments together bearing a grudge against her.

I rested a hesitant hand on her shoulder. She flinched at my icy touch before relaxing. Her warmth seeped over my frozen fingers, rippling up my arm to encircle my heart, stoking my sudden yearning to do anything to dispel the despair etched on her features.

“One mistake or moment of regret doesn’t lessen the value of a soul.”

I yearned to offer more than a few paltry words in comfort, but my monotonous, duty-filled existence had given me little reason to experience true regret. My soul had been stagnant for eternity—never changing, stretching, or growing—a stark contrast to the woman she’d become compared to who she’d once been. To think I would ever envy a mortal in anything should have been laughable, yet it didn’t change the fact that I would sacrifice years of my eternity for such an experience.

Beneath the layers of ice and frost that encased my heart, there was a warmth I had long forgotten, a part of me that cared not just about winter and magic but about the fragile life standing before me. For the first time in my timeless existence, I felt the rare pressure of urgency. With so little time left, I had to focus on making the last part of her life meaningful, no matter how short it was.

The weight of my decision settled over me. In doing so, I might lose a part of myself—perhaps even my powers—but the sacrifice felt insignificant compared to the chance to give her peace...and maybe even find a fragment of meaning for my own existence.

As if my powers sensed my unspoken wish, my magic suddenly stirred, summoning the mystical hourglass carved from ice that only I could see. It was always present, hovering on the edges of my awareness until I had a reason to pay attention to it. I’d sensed it niggling my thoughts throughout my interactions with Blanche, but I’d subconsciously chosen to ignore it for reasons my heart understood but my mind didn’t.

I cast the hourglass a tentative glance before allowing it to completely fill my awareness—its measurement allowed me know when to acquire the souls that fell under my jurisdiction, and at this moment it showcased the only mortal present. Even with her trapped in this state of in-between, the snow that represented the sand of a regular hourglass was precariously close to running out...meaning she had very little time remaining for me to figure out what was holding her back in order to help her move on.

Though I served as my own master with magic as my faithful servant always performing my bidding, death was a force my powers couldn’t challenge. Any attempt to manipulate the natural laws that governed Earth risked my place as the King of Winter and could bring all manner of chaos into the world. Yet though I knew I was playing a dangerous game, I had crossed the point of no return; it was too late to stop.

How could I possibly claim the soul of the little girl who had first brought me true joy in my existence?

## CHAPTER 8



*Blanche*

*One mistake or moment of regret doesn't lessen the value of a soul.* Frost's words, like a soothing balm, eased the sting of my haunting regrets, offering the first glimmer of light to pierce through the winter overcast that had long shrouded my thoughts.

Yet though I yearned to believe him, his sweet assurances couldn't fully erase the memory of the anguished way he'd abruptly ended my showcase of memories and stormed away, as if he could no longer bear to be in my presence.

Something unseen had captured his attention from the far edge of the icy room, allowing me a moment to study the tension etched into his handsome profile, illuminated by the slants of thin sunlight, further evidence in addition to the baskets of hailstones of his inner turmoil.

I had no reason to care about the whims of a mystical being, especially when strained relationships defined my life; any semblance of human connection I might have been able to previously claim had vanished upon finding myself in the streets. I had endured my pitiful life alone—forgotten by all the friends who'd never cared for me anymore than I did them—and unaware that anything was missing.

The relentless exposure to winter's icy elements had numbed not just my body but my heart as well, leaving me past feeling. Yet the loneliness I had buried deep within began to seep through the cracks in my protective shield, reaching out to the first stranger who had ever shown me kindness.

Experiencing companionship for the first time, especially so close to death, was dangerous—it gave me a newfound reason to live, fueling my desperation and making me long for the approval of the very one whose duty it was to claim my soul.

"Will you explain why you left the showcase of my memories so suddenly?" Even with his previous reassurance I wasn't entirely convinced it had nothing to do with me.

My question beckoned his distant gaze, as if I'd summoned his thoughts from faraway. An extended hesitation preceded his unconvincing answer. "It's... nothing."

I frowned. "It seems you're unpracticed not only in the art of conversation, but also in lying."

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly, penetrating his somber expression. "I'm afraid that particular skill wasn't part of my training." His bashful smile sent an unfamiliar flutter through my heart, a gesture somehow far more endearing than the practiced charm and flowery compliments of all my past suitors.



“Are you lying to spare my feelings?”

He sighed. “Partly, but also because I’d rather not share what’s bothering me. In my eternal experience, I’ve learned there’s no use dwelling on a past that can’t be changed; all one can do is move forward.”

Such a task was difficult when time was a currency I was rapidly running out of. “I no longer have such a luxury.”

The hint of a smile toying at his lips faltered, causing me to immediately miss it. “Forgive me, I didn’t mean to be insensitive to your situation. But as long as you’re still alive, there’s always a chance to progress.”

If only I had some way to measure how many breaths I had left, how many moments were still mine to experience. The question lodged in my throat, too fearful to emerge—until the uncertainty became unbearable.

“Your sudden departure kept me from asking if you discovered what’s holding my soul back.”

He shook his head. “While I’ve managed to gather some information, I feel as though I’m still in the early stages of crafting a snowflake—I’ve formed the outline, but the details remain uncarved, leaving me with an incomplete picture of the life you’ve lived.”

Disbelief momentarily robbed me of words. I’d thought it was obvious what type of person I was—conceited, friendless, at times even cruel—making me wonder if we’d witnessed the same showcase of memories.

Upon noticing my shock he explained further. “Memories only comprise of one aspect of a person; in truth humans are much more complex.”

My brow furrowed. “Yet aren’t we shaped by the experiences that comprise our memories?”

“Perhaps on the surface, but each event is built upon those that came before; without that foundation, everything would unfold in entirely different ways. Don’t judge yourself too harshly for the path you ended up on.”

I longed to believe him, to finally extend the grace I’d denied myself for so long. He had undoubtedly witnessed far more lifetimes than I could ever imagine, and while his experience came solely from observation, I couldn’t begin to comprehend the wisdom he’d gained over the expanse of forever, watching an overview of all human history. With only my own life to measure, I had no way to determine its worth beyond the harsh lens of regret.

*Mistakes don’t lessen the value of a soul.*

Though the sentiment was healing, it still didn’t explain why he’d left so abruptly, nor the haunted look that overshadowed his once easygoing confidence. But we weren’t close enough for me to press the issue, leaving that mystery unresolved.

As the silence stretched between us, the weight of unspoken questions grew heavier. I realized how much he knew about me—more than anyone else ever had—while I remained almost entirely in the dark about him. The imbalance gnawed at me, a reminder of the distance still separating us despite everything we’d shared.

My sigh once more drew his questioning gaze. “You possess an unfair advantage: you’ve seen my entire life, yet I haven’t learned anything about yours.” I couldn’t fully explain the illogical desire to learn more about him, but if I was to die, I wanted to leave this life knowing more about the only man who’d shown me mercy and understanding, even after uncovering my darkest innermost secrets.

“It would take several human lifetimes to recount an existence that spans an eternity...but there is a tender moment I cherish that I discovered we share while watching your memories.” He tilted his head, silently motioning for me to follow.

I walked after him more willingly this time, puzzling over his statement. Unlike the first time I'd wandered the icy corridors, I wasn't simply admiring the artistry of each intricate snowy design adorning the shimmering walls; deeper purpose guided each echoing footstep, a yearning to discover more about the enigmatic being who had crafted this breathtaking wonder.

When we reached the library, it felt as if we had stepped into the pages of a wintry fairytale. Large mullioned windows crafted of thin panes of perfectly transparent ice framed breathtaking views of the snowy landscape beyond, where the sheen of white glistened under the sunlight, creating a serene and picturesque backdrop.

The room itself was adorned with touches of winter—delicate snowflake ornaments hung from the chandelier and window frames, while garlands of pine and holly draped the shelves, enhancing the enchanting atmosphere. As we ventured deeper, I noticed that the shelves were filled not with the usual leather-bound volumes, but with books that, like everything else, seemed to be carved from ice. I felt the strong urge to explore these mystical tomes more closely, but was uncertain where to begin or if I would even be able to read such magical books.

I could feel Frost's anticipatory gaze, as if he was eagerly awaiting my reaction. "It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen." Though the words felt inadequate to express the extent of my awe, they were apparently sufficient.

His chest swelled. "It's one of my finest creations."

Cold prickled my fingertip as I traced the frozen spines lining the shelves we passed. "What is this place?"

"A room containing stories unlike any found in mortal libraries," he explained. "Because water preserves memory, I used my powers to compose them into ice so that I could keep a record of all the souls I've gathered throughout the years. There is one in particular I want to show you."

At his command, the magic in the air stirred, coalescing into a glimmer of light, like the first star appearing in the night sky. I watched as it floated towards a specific volume on a nearby shelf, beckoning me to follow.

With his nod of permission in response to my curious glance, I drew closer. The light hovered in front of a book bound in a powdery blue cover, with silver embossing that glistened with a magical glow that hinted at the enchanting contents within. Lifting the book out reverently, I carefully turned the glossy pages, each infused with a faint, frosty sheen that was cool to the touch, the texture smooth yet slightly crisp, reminiscent of ice.

My breath caught as I saw the book's contents—a treasure trove of frosted designs, capturing the artistry of Frost's handiwork in exquisite detail. Silver filigree adorned the edges, catching the light and highlighting the intricate patterns of frost. The delicate tendrils and crystalline shapes seemed alive, shifting and glistening as if freshly formed. In wonder I traced an exquisite flourish of ice, feeling the cold beneath my fingers that could not melt the magical shapes.

A cool breeze wafted from the book with each turn of the pages, carrying the crisp scent of winter. Each spread showcased different designs that had once graced my windowpanes, ranging from simple, elegant snowflakes to elaborate, sprawling scenes that told a story in frost. Some patterns were geometric and symmetrical, while others were whimsical and organic, like vines of ice curling across the page, capturing the way frost catches the first rays of dawn or glows softly in the moonlight.

As I turned the pages, something niggled at the edges of my memory, a vague sense of familiarity I couldn't quite place. It wasn't until I reached a particular

design—a swirl of delicate snowflakes intertwined with icy ferns—that the recognition struck me. My heart skipped a beat as I realized why these patterns felt so significant.

They were from my childhood.

A rush of tender memories flooded back, clear and vivid, as if no time had passed at all. I remembered waking each morning in the lavish room where I'd grown up, eagerly running to the window to see the new frost designs that had appeared overnight. I'd always imagined that the frost patterns were created just for me, a secret gift from the winter itself. Deep down I'd known it wasn't true, but the fantasy had brought me comfort, a small but precious joy in an otherwise lonely childhood.

But now, as I stared at these very same designs perfectly preserved in the book before me, I realized that perhaps my childish fantasy had been more than my girlish longings. Who else could have created something so beautiful? The thought that someone—or something—had crafted these designs with such care and artistry made my heart ache with a strange, bittersweet longing.

I turned another page, my fingers trembling slightly as I traced the familiar patterns. Each design brought with it another fragment of my past containing a precious moment of that innocent joy. The swirling frost, the delicate snowflakes, the intricate vines of ice—they were all pieces of my childhood, carefully preserved as if waiting for me to rediscover the wonder they'd once inspired.

The power contained within these shimmering pages transported me back to those cherished moments, chipping away at the icy shield that had blocked my memory until it returned in a rush.

*As the first light of morning filtered through the curtains, I awoke to a whisper of winter's magic. With sleepy eyes, I shuffled to the window in eager anticipation, the crisp chill of the room mingling with the warmth of my breath against the glass. Peering out, I was greeted by the enchanting sight of the windowpane adorned with a delicate tapestry of frosted designs.*

*The frost painted a story in intricate patterns—swirling ivy that curled and twisted, delicate snowflakes that danced among the tendrils, and lace-like filigrees that shimmered with a ghostly beauty. The designs sparkled faintly in the soft morning light, casting ephemeral rainbows that rippled across the glass. Each frost-kissed motif was a masterpiece of nature's artistry, capturing the essence of winter's quiet elegance.*

*My eyes widened in wonder as I traced the patterns with my fingertips, feeling the cold sting of the frost beneath my touch. The designs seemed to come alive, telling a silent story of winter's arrival. I exhaled slowly, leaving a foggy imprint on the glass. For a moment, the outside world faded away as I lost myself in the serene beauty of the delicate frostwork, a fleeting reminder of the season's magical touch.*

Reliving the memory bathed me in nostalgia, not just for the daily delights of each new discovery on the glass, but for the simple joy each design had provided. I longed to recapture that childlike wonder, one of the few bright glimmers in my otherwise clouded past.

As the realization dawned on me, a light illuminated my understanding. "These frosted designs are your creations."

Crimson tinged his pale cheeks, not from the cold but an endearing blush. Avoiding my eyes, he nodded shyly. "At first the designs were similar to those I left on other windows, but when I saw how much you appreciated them, I began to create special ones just for you. I'd often stay up late, thinking of something new to delight you."

His words settled over me like a gentle snowfall. The designs I had once believed were meant just for me had indeed been crafted with intention by someone who understood the beauty in the cold and the wonder found in winter and knew that I took delight in them. While I'd been surrounded by luxury—with a room full of toys and fine clothes—no one had taken the time or effort to see what I truly wanted...except him.

The realization that he was the creator of the frost patterns I had always cherished left me overwhelmed. Despite all the magic I'd witnessed in this castle of ice, a part of me had stubbornly clung to doubt, unable to connect the evidence of my senses to reality. But now I could no longer deny that he truly was the King of Winter.

In that moment, I felt the first true connection to the enigmatic figure who'd saved me—the one who had unknowingly brightened my childhood with his art. These weren't just patterns of frost; they were a part of my past, a link to the Winter King himself, who had been with me all along, even when I didn't know it.

The thought that I'd had a connection with this mystical being long before he found me freezing in that abandoned alley was astonishing. I'd believed my entire childhood had been overshadowed by loneliness, only to discover that Frost had taken notice of me and gone out of his way to bring me what small measure of happiness he could.

I finally managed to find my voice. "Those designs meant more to me than you can possibly realize." My gratitude emerged tentatively, unfamiliar on my tongue.

"As did your pleasure to me," he said. "My work often goes unappreciated."

I traced the frosted designs caressing each page, as if a single touch could transport me back to my childhood when I first discovered them on my windowpane—a time of simplicity and innocence, despite my deep loneliness, before my outlook had grown hardened and bitter.

As the nostalgia deepened, I found myself yearning to relive that cherished moment. "I've always wanted to watch the mystical being who created these wondrous designs, and even longed to create some myself. I used to imagine it over and over, meeting the artist of ice."

His eyes widened with disbelief, as if unsure whether he had heard me correctly. A bashful smile slowly appeared on his lips, dispelling the lingering shadows and lighting up his eyes. "You really want to see me create them? I want nothing more than to show humans how beautiful winter truly is."

He seized my hand and led me back through the halls. As we passed his workshop, I peeked inside to see his workbench neat and waiting, his tools at the ready.

"Do you ever take a break from your work of sustaining winter?" I asked.

He looked at me, puzzled. "It's my life's purpose."

"What about when winter is...gone? During the other seasons, do you just remain in your kingdom and wait for winter to return?"

He looked slightly amused but answered me seriously. "I do stay where it is always winter, but I don't pause in my work. During the other three seasons, I have plenty to do—crafting snowflakes, creating a schedule for storms and other wintry weather, and studying to hone my craft. I also add magical fortifications to my palace to keep it...strong." He said the last word softly, looking troubled. "Open the door next to my workbench."

Curiously I twisted the frozen doorknob and pushed it open. Unlike the icy opulence I'd seen throughout most of the palace, this spacious chamber was simple and serviceable, stretching almost as far as I could see. The walls were lined with

ice chests, transparent enough to reveal the countless snowflakes protected within. A calendar hung on the wall, neatly marked with what I assumed was Frost's weather schedule. Along the ceiling floated miniature clouds, heavy with snow and waiting to be expanded and sent out. Huge blocks of solid ice were stacked in a corner, ready for use in his craftsmanship.

I stared in amazement. While I had finally accepted Frost's identity, I was still awed at this display of his immense power, his control over a season that affected every living thing.

I could have spent hours exploring all of his work, but Frost beckoned to me, an eager sparkle in his eyes. He took my hand again, leading me to the vast window overlooking the snowy landscape. His skin was cold, but I noticed a difference—not only was it not as frigid as the first time our hands had touched, but it seemed to stroke a part of my heart I'd never noticed before.

Whatever my young imaginings had fantasized when imagining the process that created the frosted designs across my window was nothing to the enchantment of the experience as it unfolded before me.

As dusk's first light began to filter through the curtains, Frost approached the pane with an artist's grace. With a wave of his hand, a delicate breath of icy air spiraled from his fingertips, alighting onto the glass. Instantly, the windowpane began to transform beneath his touch. He moved with purpose and precision, his icy fingers trailing over the shimmering surface to create swirling arabesques and geometric designs that intertwined seamlessly.

Intricate patterns emerged as delicate tendrils of frost wove their way across the glass, directed by the king who watched with great concentration as the frost spread. The tendrils curled and branched out like the finest lace, each pattern unique and detailed. Fern-like fronds unfurled, their edges crisp and precise, catching the rosy evening light in a dance of crystalline beauty. Stars and flowers of frost bloomed alongside each other, their petals glistening with a soft, silvery glow. The frost patterns seemed almost alive, growing and expanding with an organic grace that belied their frozen nature.

Each stroke was a testament to his skill and creativity, transforming the ordinary window into a canvas of winter's artistry. The sunlight filtered through the frosted glass, casting refracting light into a myriad of colors, making the patterns sparkle and dance in a mesmerizing display.

When he finished, Frost stepped back to admire the enchanting scene before eagerly seeking my gaze for my approval. For a long moment I couldn't speak, bound by the reverence that had accompanied his creative display. Finally my voice emerged as a breath of wonder. "I've never witnessed something so magical. I wish I could experience it for myself."

I envied him not just for his powers and skill, but for the passion that filled his vast expanse of time. In contrast, my life felt utterly meaningless, marked by my endless pursuit of fleeting pleasures without any real joy.

A pleasant shiver tiptoed across my skin from his breath tickling my neck as he leaned closer. "Would you like to create magic for yourself? I could help you, if you wish."

My breath caught. "Is that possible?"

"While trapped in this state of in-between, your soul—while not immortal—is no longer entirely human...as evidenced from the single spark of magic you manifested earlier." A mischievous glint sparkled his eyes as he angled his body towards mine. "Are you ready?" His voice was a cool whisper, echoing the chill of winter.

I nodded with a mix of curiosity and excitement. It'd only taken a single demonstration to ignite my fascination with Frost's magic—his ability to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary with a single touch that made me yearn to experience it for myself.

He took my hands in his, his touch cool but gentle. "I will bestow a portion of my power to stoke the glimmer you received when your soul entered this realm." I drew in my breath as an aqua glow enfolded my hands, leaving my skin tingling as it faded. "Close your eyes and feel the magic inside you, like a cold river flowing through your veins."

I obeyed, my eyes fluttering shut. I focused on the sensation, feeling the cool energy that radiated from Frost's hands seeping into my own.

"Now imagine that cold spreading through your fingers down to the tips. Picture the patterns you want to create, the intricate designs that will form on the glass."

My brow furrowed slightly as I concentrated, visualizing delicate snowflakes and swirling icy tendrils.

"Good," Frost murmured, his voice a gentle guide. "Now, open your eyes and place your hands on the windowpane."

I did as instructed, pressing my palms against the cold glass. At first, nothing happened and I felt a flicker of doubt. But then, I felt a tingling sensation, as if a delicate breath of frost was beginning to awaken beneath my touch.

Frost leaned closer, his breath cool against my ear as he whispered. "Relax and let the magic flow naturally. Don't force it."

I released my tension with a trembling breath. I felt the magic respond, more eagerly this time as it flowed out of me and onto the glass. The whisper of frost began to spread, delicate crystalline patterns unfurling across the windowpane. I gasped in disbelief as swirling vines of ice and snowflakes blossomed beneath my fingers, each one unique and beautiful. I glanced at my hands in wonder; was this the first time I had used them to create rather than simply taking what others had made?

My eyes widened with delight as I watched the frost grow, the patterns becoming more elaborate and intricate. Frost smiled, his icy blue eyes soft. "It's all about feeling the magic and letting it guide you."

He placed his hands beside mine on the window and together we created a breathtaking tapestry of frost. The designs merged and intertwined, forming a stunning work of art that sparkled in the light, a magical frozen garden.

For a moment, we stood in silence, admiring our creation, the warmth of our shared moment contrasting with the chill of the magic. "Thank you for sharing your world with me," I murmured.

"It was my pleasure sharing it with you." I startled at the pinprick of cold that suddenly kissed the corner of my mouth as his fingertip gently touched me—an icy touch that, coming from him, somehow felt warm. "You're smiling."

Dazed, I reached up to graze my lips, twitching as if they ached to lift, a gesture I'd forgotten since realizing there was little to smile about ever again. Yet despite knowing death was near, in this moment I could see the beauty in a season where I had once believed it didn't exist. With him, I could finally capture the quiet joy I had spent years seeking that no longer felt so elusive.

## CHAPTER 9



### *Frost*

I couldn't look away from Blanche, mesmerized by the way her fingers caressed the glass and the awe that lit her soft grey eyes at the frosted design she'd created. My skin still tingled from where I'd touched her, long after I'd pulled away.

At first, I thought it was just a reaction to our differing body temperatures, but I hadn't responded this way to the warmth of the fireplace—that heat had blistered my skin, whereas this sensation seemed to reach inside me, curling itself around my heart that I had believed only cared about my powers to create winter.

*What was happening?*

I was afraid to analyze the foreign emotions surging through me, or to investigate the reason I'd found unexpected joy not just in touching her—a mere human—but in sharing my world with her. With every weave of my magic in the designs we'd created, I felt an invisible connection binding us closer, leaving me changed.

What had I been thinking, sharing a portion of my powers with her?

I could have stared at the frost patterns we'd created for a good portion of my eternity...but then the delicate lacework shimmered as tiny beads of condensation formed on the glass, causing the once clear ice crystals to begin to soften around the edges. I leaned forward in surprise, stretching a finger out and drawing it back to stare at the droplets now clinging to it.

The condensation gathered, growing into larger droplets that trickled down the glass in meandering paths, disrupting the frosty designs. Each droplet moved slowly at first—as if reluctant to erase the beautiful patterns etched by the cold—but gradually the once icy canvas melted away, revealing the snowy landscape tinged with the soft hues of settling dusk.

Blanche heaved a disheartened sigh. “That was as fleeting as my life has become. If only beauty could last forever.”

I couldn't answer as apprehension descended over me like a shadow blocking out the sun. While sunlight always eventually erased my frosted designs in the villages, they should have been immortal in my winter kingdom like every other image I'd created over the eons. Had the design melted away because it was created by a human, or had something gone wrong with the magic itself? Whatever the cause, it served as an unwelcome reminder that cold and warmth couldn't coexist—a void created by our separate worlds that would forever keep us apart.

“What is it?” Her soft voice beckoned my worried concentration away from the window towards her inquisitive expression, her forehead knit with concern.

"It's nothing." I flexed my hand in an effort to dispel the lingering shadow of her touch. She already had enough weighing upon her soul for me to burden her with my concerns. And yet I yearned to share them with her, a strange whim I'd never before experienced throughout my entire eternity.

Her fingertip caught a wayward drop as the last trace of her design faded, her look wistful as she stared at it. "I wish I could see more of your magic, to understand winter's beauty the way you do."

An indescribable feeling washed over me at her words, the bright interest in her eyes stoking my desire to share my magic with her instead of keeping the beauty of my creations to myself. A spark of hope kindled within me, longing to see her joy as she discovered something I cherished through her own eyes.

Yet as quickly as the eagerness came, uncertainty crept in its wake. Opening up more of myself to a mortal seemed dangerous, especially when their lives were so fleeting—and Blanche's was rapidly nearing its end, as indicated by the enchanted hourglass in my peripheral vision. I had no need to involve myself beyond what was necessary to claim her soul, completing my duty to her and my kingdom.

But when her clear gaze met mine, all rational thought vanished. Against all sense, I wanted to spend time with her, to do everything in my power to make her last moments memorable.

"Let me show you winter through my eyes." I extended my hand, and after a brief hesitation, she placed hers in mine. Slowly, I intertwined my fingers with hers, and together we stepped outside.

The cold air embraced us as we descended the castle steps; I felt her instinctively draw closer to me, pulling my cloak more tightly around herself. Delicate snowflakes drifted lazily from the overcast sky and each breath formed a misty puff in the settling night. Moonlight cast a silvery glow over the landscape, making the snow shimmer like a jeweled sea. A gasp of awe escaped Blanche's lips, her eyes brightening as she took in the winter splendor.

Our footsteps crunched softly in the untouched snow as I led her away from the castle. The world was hushed and serene, as if holding its breath in reverence for the moment. When we neared a snow-dusted clearing, I reluctantly released her hand, lingering on the warmth of her touch for just a moment longer before letting go.

"What are you going to create?" she asked.

I smiled. "You'll see."

I put a short distance between us until I stood at the edge of the icy expanse. Her eyes widened with anticipation as I lifted my hands to the sky. A whisper of frost began to form beneath my touch as my power immediately responded to the unspoken command, rippling through the air and sending a chill sweeping across the land as my magic took hold.

The first flurries of snow appeared, delicate and almost hesitant, as if testing the air before drifting lazily from the overcast sky, each flake a tiny piece of my enchantment that transformed the landscape into a vast, white canvas. The wind picked up, swirling the falling snow into gentle flurries that danced around us, as if the world itself was participating in my magic, every gust of wind and flake of snow perfectly timed to my silent commands.

I couldn't resist stealing a glance at Blanche watching nearby. Her eyes were wide with wonder as she instinctively reached out to catch a snowflake on her fingertip, lifting it to eye level to marvel at its intricate design before it melted away.



Her delight spurred me on. I moved with purpose, my steps leaving frosty imprints on the ground. With a graceful, sweeping motion, I intensified my magic. The surrounding air shimmered with the raw energy of winter as the snowfall grew heavier. I once more looked at Blanche to see her slowly twirling, arms outstretched as the wintry gusts lifted her hair and showered her with delicate flakes. My heart lifted to see the joy on her face, absent of its usual concern or guilt.

All at once the calm atmosphere shifted. The change in the air was subtle at first, as if something had blocked my power. The sky swiftly darkened as thick clouds gathered overhead. The snowflakes grew more numerous, swirling around me in a chaotic dance, and the wind picked up, whistling through the trees and carrying the snow with increasing force. Blanche paused, grasping at her cloak that whipped away from her body in the gale and lifting an arm to shield her face from the blustery snow.

My heart pounded, each beat echoing through the emptiness where my power should have been. Beads of sweat formed on my brow as I concentrated, but the energy that normally flowed effortlessly sputtered and waned. I felt a fleeting flicker of my magic respond, only for it to extinguish as quickly as it had come. The faint glow at my fingertips flickered weakly like a dying ember before going out. Dimly I saw Blanche take a staggering step, trying to keep her balance in the wind as I frantically tried to reignite my magic.

With the loss of my careful control, the snowfall intensified. The flakes grew larger and more numerous, swirling thickly as the storm gathered strength. The wind howled through the trees, carrying the snow in frenzied gusts that stung my exposed skin like tiny shards of ice.

For a moment, I could only stare in disbelief, barely registering my surprise that the snow could affect its creator in such an unprecedented way before my mind shifted focus. *Blanche*.

I searched for her form, but the blizzard whirled in a relentless torrent, creating blinding curtains of white that obscured everything in its path. Desperation crept in as I tried to draw on the elemental forces around me, seeking to stabilize my power, but it slipped from my grasp, unresponsive and elusive.

I released the fragile hold on my magic and rushed forward, blindly pushing through the swirling blur of white and grey in the direction where I'd last seen Blanche. I'd barely taken a few frantic steps when I suddenly collided with her. Instinctively, I caught hold of her before she could fall. She felt so small and fragile within the cradle of my arms, stoking my urgency to find shelter.

Though my castle was nearby, it wasn't close enough to trust Blanche's fragile mortality to the harsh elements, not when a nearby cavern was much closer.

There was no time to dwell on the perplexing mystery of why my powers were faltering, not with the storm raging around us. While the cold and snow had no effect on me, they were deadly to a human, especially someone teetering on the brink of life after having so recently frozen to death.

She lifted her eyes to mine, wide with fear. Her lips were turning blue, but she managed to open them enough to whisper. "Is this...the end?"

I could scarcely make out her words over the howling wind, but my heart contracted, imagining the terror she must feel as she thought winter had come to finish its work upon her.

"No!" I wrapped my arms around her as though to defy the storm buffeting us. One urgent thought cut through, far louder than my concern for her welfare: *I didn't want her to die*. That was my most pressing need in this moment, no matter how short a time she had left to live. For as many souls as I'd claimed after they'd frozen

to death, I had no idea how close she currently was to once more succumbing to that fate, especially with the snowstorm obscuring the mystical hourglass whose haunting presence measured her remaining time.

“Are you alright?” The wind drowned my voice, but it carried just far enough to reach her ears. My panic escalated at her unresponsive silence.

The storm raged around us, a furious blend of wind and snow that rendered our path nearly indiscernible in the blinding whiteout. The cold was piercing, each gust of wind penetrating our layers of clothing with icy precision.

*Is this what it feels like to freeze?*

With every struggling step, I sensed Blanche’s shivers growing more intense. I paused long enough to pull her close, encircling her in a protective barrier against the storm’s relentless fury. Her body trembled violently, chilled to the bone despite the thick cloak she wore. The fatigue and cold etched on her face when I could glimpse it through the intensifying blizzard deepened my concern.

“Hold on,” I murmured, my voice barely audible over the howling gale. I adjusted my position, turning my back to the wind so that my body shielded hers from the brunt of the icy blasts.

We moved slowly, my movements steady and sure as I guided her haltering steps forward. I kept my arm wrapped around her shoulders, holding her close, while my other hand gripped hers tightly. I didn’t remember the exact moment I’d reached for her hand, but nothing would compel me to let go.

Several minutes of achingly slow progress later, Blanche tripped and sank to her knees. She made a feeble effort to stand before collapsing, her eyes closed. Frantically I lifted her to her feet, but she was too weak to keep her footing in the violent wind. I scooped her into my arms, reminded of how I’d first brought her to this realm, and hoped I wasn’t currently carrying her to her death.

After what felt like the longest moment in my eternity, a dark shape loomed ahead, a shadow amidst the endless sea of white. As we drew closer the outline sharpened, revealing a cavern embedded into the mountainside—a promise of shelter from the storm.

The entrance was partially obscured by drifts of snow. I pushed forward through the thick blizzard, the icy wind at my back urging me onward until I finally stepped inside. As we crossed the threshold, the howling wind was suddenly muffled, and the relentless assault of snow and ice came to an abrupt halt.

Relief flooded through me, followed by the startling realization that for the first time I had experienced the human fear brought by the forces of nature. While I hadn’t been afraid for my own life, the loss of control and feeling weaker than the storm had been a sensation I hoped I’d never feel again...along with the sharper, more agonizing fear that Blanche might not survive the ordeal.

Inside, the air was warmer—a comforting sensation I’d never before encountered. The rough, jagged walls rose around us, glistening with moisture. Icicles and stalactites adorned the ceiling, catching the faint light that filtered in from the entrance. The uneven ground was a mix of stone and patches of ice, yet solid and reassuring beneath our feet.

As I ventured deeper still holding Blanche tightly in my arms, the cavern opened into a larger chamber. The walls were covered in frost, glittering like a myriad of tiny stars in the dim light. I could hear the soft fall of water from ice that under normal circumstances shouldn’t be melting, the sound echoing ominously through the space. A sense of tranquility settled around us, a stark and soothing contrast to the storm outside.

Further exploration revealed a sheltered nook, a natural alcove in the rock where we could rest. Carefully setting Blanche on her unsteady feet, I guided her to a relatively dry patch and gently helped her down into a sitting position, assisting her in leaning against the cool rock. As she settled, the tension visibly drained from her body, although it still shook uncontrollably from the chill. I anxiously examined her, noting her flushed cheeks—a painful reminder of just how vulnerable humans were to the cold.

I briskly rubbed her arms in an effort to generate friction and warmth, hoping that my icy skin wouldn't deepen her shrouding chill. Each touch escalated the conflict raging within me—I could feel the subtle drain on my magic, like the slow trickle of sand through an hourglass. A part of me feared that by helping her, I was weakening the very essence that had sustained me for eons. Yet despite that worry, I couldn't stop, driven by a fierce, protective instinct I couldn't fully explain that compelled me to do all within my power to shield her from the storm.

I knelt before her, moving my attention to rubbing her hands between mine to restore warmth, my eyes never leaving her face. The sensation of her skin against mine, warm and fragile, sent a pang of anxiety through me, making me fear I was risking too much. Only the unbearable thought of her suffering allowed me to continue, despite the danger to my power.

She looked up at me, gratitude shining in her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion.

The warmth of her words reached deep into my core, momentarily silencing the fears gnawing at the edges of my thoughts. Though every touch seemed to chip away at my magic, the look in her eyes made it feel worth the sacrifice.

Despite my attention she continued to shiver. Unsure what else to do, I wrapped my damp cloak around her shoulders, tucking the edges in snugly before settling beside her, my arm around her once more. At first she sat stiffly, her rigid posture leaning away from me, as if afraid to get too close.

"Lean on me," I urged, my voice gentle but firm. Without a means to light a fire, huddling for warmth was the best I could offer her. When she remained still, I tightened my embrace encouragingly.

After a moment's hesitation, her need for warmth overcame the reluctance holding her back. She nestled into my chest, burying her face in the crook of my neck, seeking the warmth and reassurance that my presence offered even if my skin was cool.

She remained uncannily still for so long that I found myself leaning closer repeatedly to ensure I could see the rise and fall of her chest in the dim light. Eventually, she stirred, her cold fingers fumbling as she reached into her pocket and withdrew one of her few remaining matches.

"Please—" It was all she managed before the cold snatched the rest of her earnest plea.

I seized the match, disregarding any potential consequences of lighting a fire or its effects on my magic. Quickly, I gathered some dead leaves and brittle branches scattered near the entrance and in the corners by the rocks. Whether it was my urgency, familiarity with Blanche's previous attempts to light a fire, or the peculiar weakening of my magic that allowed it, I managed to ignite the match on the first try. It crackled softly in the cold stillness, its amber glow spreading comforting rays across the cavern.

With the fire lit, I feared she might pull away from my touch as I wrapped her in the security of my embrace—a position I was slowly coming to cherish. Instead, she scooted closer. Though my cold body offered limited warmth, the fire gradually

eased her shivers, warming her enough to eventually speak.

“When I asked to see your magic, I never expected to experience a storm like this; it seems it’s my fate to freeze after all.” The words were barely discernible through the chatter of her teeth.

I wanted to explain that the storm had slipped beyond my usual control and taken on a life of its own, but even after her imminent danger had passed now that we’d found shelter, my mind remained numb with shock, leaving me at a loss for how to solve this unexpected puzzle.

Silence enveloped us as we watched the storm rage, the only sounds the pounding of our hearts and the deafening rush of wind outside, its icy breath thwarted by the protective cavern walls. The small fire cast a flickering light, casting dancing shadows across the rough, uneven walls and forming a cocoon of warmth in the cold darkness.

I held Blanche close, my arms wrapped securely around her, my body a shield against the chill. At first, the heat of her body pressed against mine brought an unexpected discomfort, the warmth foreign to my frozen essence. But as I felt her shiver, that discomfort quickly gave way to a stronger desire to protect her. Each moment of contact further threatened my powers, yet I couldn't bring myself to let go.

She nestled into my chest, clutching the fabric of my cloak, her face pressed against my shoulder. Our breaths mingled, forming small clouds of condensation that quickly vanished in the cold air. Despite the weakening of my magic with each touch, I found myself gently rubbing her back, my hands moving in slow, soothing circles.

I could feel her steady pulse, a comforting rhythm that calmed my own. Her hair brushed against my chin and I buried my face against its softness, feeling a strange sense of peace. Among all my experiences throughout my expanse of forever, this moment was already the most precious—the puzzling reason for why almost as perplexing as the mystery of why my powers had left my control to create the storm.

As the fire crackled softly, its warm glow flickering across the cave, I watched Blanche slowly drift to sleep. Her breaths grew steady and deep, her chest rising and falling in a gentle rhythm. Her eyelashes briefly fluttered before resting softly on her cheeks, a peaceful expression smoothing away her worries.

The firelight highlighted the delicate curve of her lips and the soft lines of her face. I marveled at her quiet beauty, feeling a swell of gratitude that she was here with me, safe and warm. The harsh storm outside seemed worlds away, unable to intrude on this moment. I hesitated only briefly before I couldn't resist reaching for her hand, intertwining my fingers with hers.

Rather than pulling away, her hold curled around mine, causing my breath to hitch in surprise. This simple gesture ignited a deep, hidden part of me that until this moment I hadn't known existed. Instead of allowing this memory to blend with the others comprising my eternity, I tucked it away in its own special section of my heart, along with the other beautiful moments I'd experienced over the past couple of days.

As she slept in my arms, Blanche's soft, rhythmic breathing drowned out the song of the storm that had once been my favorite sound. Her breaths provided a comforting assurance that for the moment she was still alive...even though each inhale and exhale meant one less breath left in her allotted time.

It took every ounce of discipline to shift my focus from her peaceful slumber to the troubling issue that something had gone terribly wrong with my magic. The

thought of losing the power that not only brought me my greatest joy but also defined my very existence was unbearable. Without winter or my powers, I was nothing. Yet, amidst this crisis, I felt as if I was discovering something far more significant than anything I'd learned across the vast expanse of eternity.

As if to stoke this unrecognizable emotion gradually growing within, Blanche leaned further into me with a sleepy sigh that seemed to reach deep inside to curl around my heart. Our proximity made me acutely aware of every shiver that rippled over her and allowed me to monitor each visible breath that formed small clouds in the frigid air. Each of her shivers sent an unexpected pang through my heart, an unwanted reminder of how despite my secret wish, we were worlds apart.

I was growing far closer to her than was wise for someone whose lifespan was but a fleeting moment in my eternal existence. Yet, this attachment seemed to be developing beyond my control, much like my faltering powers that had created such a violent storm.

The undeniable truth remained: I had never desired to keep anyone alive as much as I wanted to protect her—the very woman whose death sentence it was my duty to fulfill. Was a fleeting love worth the cost of potentially losing my magic forever?

## CHAPTER 10



### *Blanche*

As I drifted in and out of sleep, I felt as if I were floating between worlds. The contrast between warmth and cold was disorienting—one moment I was enveloped in a comforting warmth that felt like a gentle embrace, the next I was plunged into a biting cold that cut through me like a knife. The two warred for dominance, blurring the lines between reality and dreams and rousing me from my peaceful rest.

With an effort, I forced my eyes to flutter open, my lashes heavy with the remnants of sleep. The world around me gradually came into focus, but the lingering sensation of warmth and cold remained, as if I were still teetering on the edge of that strange, dreamlike state.

When some of the foggy confusion cleared, I slowly took in my surroundings—not the abandoned alley I half-expected given the coldness gripping me, nor even the ice palace that I was slowly accepting as reality...but a cavern with jagged stone walls, dimly lit by the dying embers of a nearby fire. The scent of earth and wood smoke mingled with the crispness of the snowstorm that raged just beyond the entrance, its muted roar outside filling the night.

For a moment, my mind was blank, struggling to grasp where I was or how I'd ended up in this unfamiliar place. The cavern seemed to close in on me, the echo of the storm outside amplifying my confusion.

My breath caught in my throat and I struggled to sit up, only to realize I couldn't move far—something, or rather *someone*, was holding me close, their strong arms wrapped protectively around my shivering frame. I fully awakened, and a flush of awareness swept over me: Frost—the mystical winter being whose duty was to capture my soul—was cradling me in his arms as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

My pulse quickened, a mix of surprise, embarrassment, and an overwhelming sense of comfort. How had we ended up like this? I searched my foggy memory for answers but found only fragments—the bitter cold of the raging snowstorm, the desperate need for shelter, the shared embrace for warmth—nothing that explained how we'd come to be entwined in such an intimate way.

Every detail of Frost's proximity flooded my senses, grounding me in the reality of the moment—the outline of his body, the steady rise and fall of his chest, the scent of a crisp winter day, the temperature that was neither warm nor completely cold, the cradle of his arms that protected me from the raging storm outside.

As the confusion of waking in an unknown place slowly ebbed away, a different kind of awareness settled over me—a deep, unspoken connection that I had never

imagined I'd experience with anyone, let alone with the mystical being who was becoming more and more dear. I hesitated, deliberating on whether or not to pull away, before I couldn't resist the urge to lean into him and let myself be held just a little longer.

I dared to glance up at him, my eyes tracing his face softened by the dim light. He was still asleep, his expression relaxed. I could feel the gentle thrum of his heartbeat against my back, a steady rhythm that anchored me. The sight of him so close and his reassuring presence made my heart ache with an unfamiliar tenderness. I studied his features relaxed in sleep, realizing that this was probably the last face I'd ever see, his arms the last that would embrace me as my life wound to its conclusion.

The once-unfathomable reality of being in Frost's domain now seemed almost tangible, and I couldn't help but marvel at the small miracle of warmth amidst the icy splendor. The fire was a stark contrast to the frost-laden surroundings, its flames casting a soft, golden glow that danced across the ice-encrusted walls, making them shimmer like jewels; the light seemed to reach across the divide between his world and mine, creating a sanctuary where warmth could exist, even in the heart of winter.

It wasn't just the flickering fire, but the very fact that he had built it just for me. Despite the cold that defined his existence, Frost, the embodiment of winter itself, had gone against his intrinsic nature to offer me this warmth, a silent acknowledgment of my humanity in a realm where such softness had no place. In that moment, the fire wasn't just a source of heat; it was a symbol of the care he had begun to show for me, an effort to bridge the gap between our worlds.

In this quiet, snow-blanketed world, the storm outside was a distant concern. All that mattered was the warmth of his arms around me, a warmth I was surprised to experience from a being of ice, the feeling of safety and belonging that enveloped me. I closed my eyes, letting the sensation of being with him anchor me in this strange, beautiful reality where for once everything felt exactly as it should.

For a long moment, my mind was content to remain in this cocoon of peace, an emotion that had felt elusive ever since I'd lost everything. But eventually my thoughts stirred, attempting to piece together the events from the night before, fragments of memories slowly resurfacing.

When the flurry of snow had first descended, blanketing the world in fresh whiteness, my initial thought had been the suffocating terror of freezing to death all over again, as if the chill of that night had never truly left me. The memory had resurfaced with a sharp clarity, as though the cold had unlocked a door I tried desperately to keep sealed shut—the violent, uncontrollable shivers; wrapping myself in every thin rag I could find that were all inefficient against the biting chill; the sound of my chattering teeth echoing the dread seeping into my chest; my tears freezing against my cheeks, leaving my face raw and stinging; the pervasive cold as it seeped into my bones, sapping my strength and warmth.

My memories had consumed me so completely that I'd been unaware of Frost guiding me to shelter, and only faintly aware of him using one of my matches to light a fire until its orange glow filled the damp cavern. My cheeks burned as I vaguely recalled drowsily reaching for him, fighting to stay awake—half terrified that if I slept, he would use his power to claim my soul during the night.

As I trembled in the icy grip of my memories, his arms suddenly wrapped around me, pulling me close to his chest. Though his body had always possessed a constant chill as if he'd been outside too long, a surprising wave of warmth radiated from him, seeping into my skin to chase away the cold that had gripped my body

and taken root in my heart, threatening to consume me.

I felt a flicker of hope rekindle within me, warmed by the unexpected kindness of my enigmatic rescuer. How strange that in the arms of the embodiment of winter itself the cold couldn't touch me, and the terror that had haunted me melted away like snow in the spring sun. I was at a loss as to his motive for protecting me from the elements when he could have just allowed me to freeze so he could claim my soul.

Yet in this moment his mysterious motives didn't matter. I pressed closer, letting myself be enveloped by the calming security he offered. With him, the recollection of freezing seemed like a distant memory, muted and far away. Despite being stranded during a violent storm, I'd never felt so safe, not even in my former life of wealth. Such elusive comfort seemed like nothing more than a dream, and I couldn't help wondering if I'd wake up in that abandoned alley on the brink of death.

The morning sun slowly rose, its rays piercing through the chill to brighten the dank stone walls. Inside, the fire had long since died down, leaving only faint wisps of smoke curling into the air. As the sun's warmth intensified, a delicate transformation began to unfold, causing the icicles and layers of frost to melt away.

Eventually, I felt Frost stir, and I hastily closed my eyes, afraid to let him know I was awake, fearing that this beautiful moment of the first time I could remember being held would come to an end. Yet some unseen force compelled me to steal a peek, curious to see what this mysterious being looked like when waking. He blinked sleep from his deep blue eyes before they widened as he took in our entwined position.

His breath caught. "I'm sorry, you were shivering and I wanted to..." His breathless explanation tumbled out in his haste to explain and the rest of his words faltered. He shifted slightly, his arm moving away from where it had rested protectively around me. A frown creased his brow as he glanced at the morning light, as though puzzled to realize he'd been asleep so long.

The absence of his touch left my skin tingling, somehow leaving me colder than when I'd been wrapped in his cold embrace, but I couldn't bring myself to ask him to hold me again.

The cave suddenly seemed smaller, the space between us filled with the weight of our unspoken thoughts. My heart pounded in my chest, every tiny movement amplified in the silence. The cave suddenly seemed smaller, yet the intimacy we'd shared felt distant, replaced by an awkwardness that neither of us knew how to navigate.

Our gazes briefly met before we both quickly looked away. We slowly sat up, careful not to brush against each other, the silence stretching on, almost uncomfortable.

Desperate to break the tension, I opened my mouth to say something, *anything*...but the words caught in my throat. As if sharing my struggle, he shyly glanced at me out of the corner of his eye before hastily focusing on the remnants of the fire. The memory of how naturally we'd clung to each other in the cold seemed almost surreal in the face of our present discomfort, as if it had happened to someone else.

Eventually, he cleared his throat, the sound startling in the stillness. "Are you... alright?"

"I think so," I responded hastily, my voice tinged with an awkward laugh that did nothing to ease the tension. "Thank you for helping me."



His hand brushed through his hair as he looked away again, the moment passing like a fleeting shadow. I never would have imagined that a being who embodied the confidence and unyielding strength of winter could in this moment appear so flustered. It was disarming, a glimpse of vulnerability that I hadn't expected to see in him.

The unspoken tension between us thickened, like the air before a storm, and with it came the awareness of all the conversations that remained unspoken, growing more pressing until they could no longer be suppressed. "Why did you help me? Wouldn't it have been easier to let me freeze?" I spoke hesitantly, my breath visible in the cool air that surrounded us.

His gaze, which had been determinedly avoiding mine, suddenly snapped back to me with a startled intensity, his eyes widening with something akin to horror at the thought. "Allow you to *freeze*? I could never do that." He shifted closer, as though to protect me from the icy grip of winter that hadn't yet completed its job.

"Yet that doesn't change the fact that you're seeking a way to claim my soul." The words hung between us like a weight. I yearned to ask him how much time I had remaining, even as I was afraid to know. The past few days we'd spent together had been more fulfilling than my entire life on earth, and I couldn't bear to imagine that they would soon come to an end.

He heaved a weary sigh, the sound filled with a deep, ancient weariness. "Not by choice; I am simply following the ancient laws of magic that allow me to create winter. Believe it or not, it breaks my heart when mortals succumb to the cold I've created; I take no pleasure in gathering their souls to extend my life."

I could see the struggle in his eyes, a reflection of the battle he faced every time he fulfilled his duty. "But *why*?" I pressed, needing to understand the force that drove him to this inevitable end.

Frost shifted, angling his body to fully face me, his icy blue eyes filled with a sorrow that matched the chill choking the air. He hesitated for a moment, as if searching for the right words, the cold wind swirling around us like a spectral whisper.

"You don't understand," he began, his voice soft with an almost tangible regret. "It's not a choice I make out of malice or cruelty. It's simply my duty, bound by forces older than time itself." An ancient sadness filled his eyes, deep and endless, as though he carried the weight of countless winters on his shoulders. "To bring winter is to bring an end, a finality that gives way to renewal—a world without winter would be a weary, lifeless place with no chance to rest and refresh. Your soul is tied to this cycle. It's your time to move on, to become part of the endless rhythm of life and death, of winter and spring. I must claim your soul not because I wish to, but because it's what must be done...lest the balance shatter, and with it, the world we both know."

He reached out, as if to touch me, but stopped just short, his hand hovering in the air, the unspoken words hanging between us like a fragile thread.

"Believe me," he continued, his voice thick with sincerity. "I would do anything to spare you this, but this is the way it has always been, and the way it must continue to be. The world depends on this balance, on the cycle that I uphold. Disrupting it would have consequences far beyond what either of us could imagine."

I searched his earnest eyes, wide with a sincerity that compelled me to trust him. Though his goal likely hadn't changed and the fate of my pending death remained the same, something had changed between us since our night spent huddled together in the cavern. This subtle shift was enough to soften the cynicism that usually

hardened my heart. I *wanted* to believe in him—my first true friend, whom I never would have met if I hadn't frozen to death in that abandoned alley.

It was in this moment as I looked into his eyes that I realized how deeply I'd grown to care for him. The thought of the inevitable, hastening end to our fragile relationship filled me with a sense of dread, even as there was also a strange comfort knowing that, for whatever time we had left, we would be together.

The blizzard had passed, leaving the world around us draped in a pristine blanket of snow. The air was crisp and clear, the storm now a distant memory, lingering only in the chill that still filled the atmosphere. The shroud of frigid cold that once dominated Frost's domain had softened, like the sun was warming the land despite the thick overcast that still blanketed the white sky, a hint of its golden light barely breaking through to glisten on the snow around us.

The scene was beautiful, but the rays of sun couldn't penetrate the deep chill that hung over us; I instinctively drew the cloak around my shoulders, feeling its dampness that lingered even after the night by the fire. From beside me, Frost's shoulders gave a sudden, convulsive shudder, and I turned towards him in surprise. "Are you cold?"

"Of course not." He hastily dismissed the notion, but though he didn't shiver again, I couldn't help but notice him draw closer to me, as if instinctively seeking warmth from our proximity. His breath became visible in the icy air, a puff of mist that seemed almost out of place. Though as the King of Winter, the elements shouldn't affect him, his strained tone was less than convincing.

As we walked back to the ice castle, an unsettling feeling gnawed at me, a sense that something fundamental had shifted—not just in the landscape around us, but within Frost himself. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. His expression remained as stoic as ever, but there was a softness to his features that I was certain hadn't been there before. His breath, visible in the chilly air, contrasted with the sharp angles of his face, once as cold and unyielding as the ice he commanded, now less severe, almost...human.

I hugged my arms around myself, more as a subconscious shield from my growing apprehension than to ward off the cold. But even that was different now. The icy chill that once clung to me whenever I was near him had lessened, replaced by a gentler, more bearable sensation—not exactly warmth, but far from the bone-deep freeze I'd come to associate with him, as if his presence had lost some of its icy bite.

The surrounding landscape also showed signs of change. The snow beneath our feet that had once crunched with the crispness of untouched ice now felt slightly slushy, as though on the verge of melting. My shoes sank into it, the dampness seeping through reminding me of my last night before entering this realm when my inadequate footwear had allowed the wet snow to submerge my feet, chilling them to the bone. Now, patches of exposed earth peeked through the thinning snow, a jarring contrast to the flawless winter landscape I had first encountered upon my arrival.

I watched as a few delicate snowflakes drifted down from the sky, only to dissolve before they touched the ground, not so much melting as simply disintegrating. Frost had conjured these elements effortlessly before, but now they seemed less vibrant, as if fading away with approaching spring. Though his expression remained impassive, I detected a hint of confusion as he surveyed his altered realm, unspoken worry tightening his eyes.

We continued in silence, the only sounds our squelching footsteps against the snow and the distant drip of melting icicles. Frost walked slightly ahead, as if

subconsciously trying to distance himself from my body heat, his normally graceful steps now slower, more deliberate. I could see the faintest hints of fatigue in the way his shoulders slumped slightly, as if the effort of maintaining his wintry domain was wearing on him.

Was it possible that our time together in the cavern and the warmth we'd shared had done this? Could the simple act of holding each other during the storm have somehow diminished his power? My heart ached at the thought, but even as I worried for him, I couldn't help but celebrate this strange connection growing between us, as if the more human he became, the more my own indiscernible feelings for him deepened.

When the towering spires of his ice castle finally came into view, I felt a pang of unease. The structure, once a masterpiece of glistening ice and sharp, crystalline edges, seemed softer, almost as if it were starting to thaw. The walls, which had always shone with a blinding brilliance, now looked duller, their surfaces marred with faint cracks that spiderwebbed across the once-flawless ice. The drawbridge lowered automatically in greeting, but creaked ominously as we passed over it.

Frost paused at the entrance, his hand resting on the door, his fingers brushing over the surface. The ice beneath his touch didn't respond the way it once had. Instead of glowing with a frosty light, it seemed to absorb the warmth of his hand, leaving behind a faint imprint that quickly faded.

He finally glanced at me and I saw something in his eyes that made my breath catch—doubt, as if he'd lost the previous self-confidence that had accompanied him ever since our first meeting. It was a fleeting expression that faded as quickly as it had appeared, replaced by the calm, measured look I'd come to know.

Yet I couldn't dispel the deepening sense of unease that something was wrong. "Does spring ever visit the winter realm?" I asked.

He gave his head a rigid shake. "But there is nothing to worry about. Our time together has simply distracted me from my duties. A bit of magic, and everything will be back on its proper course." His voice hitched, as if trying to convince himself rather than me.

I frowned. Whatever had changed between us after what transpired during the storm, I felt I understood him better than before, enough to sense that he was lying. "Are you certain?"

He nodded, but the gesture was small, almost reluctant. "I'm fine," he replied, his voice steady but lacking its usual cold detachment. "Just...tired." He pressed his lips together, as though he regretted the admission and wished he could take it back.

*Tired.* The word hung between us, heavy with implications. Frost had never admitted to such a human weakness before. I reached out, my hand hovering near his, unsure if he would welcome the touch or if it would only remind him of what he appeared to be losing. But before I could graze his skin, he turned and pushed open the door, leading us inside.

The interior of the castle was just as grand and imposing as I remembered, but there was a subtle difference in the air—not only was it not as cold as before, but many of the frosty carvings decorating the snowy walls had faded. In addition, the ice sculptures that lined the halls seemed to have lost some of their definition, their edges smoother and more fluid, missing some of the intricate detail from before. Even the light filtering through the icy walls was dimmer, less vibrant...and warmer.

My mind whirled, the signs around us impossible to ignore—Frost was changing, and with it his power seemed to be waning. What did that mean for not only him, but the balance of the winter he'd always maintained?

## CHAPTER 11



### *Frost*

I stood at the edge of my domain, staring out at the vast expanse of snow and ice. The cold winds whipped around me, but they no longer offered the comfort they once had. Instead, they felt hollow, as if the very essence of my world was slipping away from me.

*What was happening to me?*

Panic cinched my chest, a foreign, painful feeling that I struggled to suppress, making every effort to keep my expression stoic so that Blanche wouldn't notice. An internal battle raged within me as I found myself torn between not wanting to worry her and an unexpected longing to lean on her and seek comfort from her presence, a strange and unsettling desire when I'd managed just fine during my eternity of isolation.

For the centuries measuring my forever, my powers had been unwavering, constant in their strength, their only alteration coming with my discovery of new and innovative ways to wield winter's might as I mastered them over time. Though my creations inevitably faded in the mortal world with the arrival of spring, that season's reach had never extended to my realm, where winter was a perpetual presence. The cold, once an extension of myself, now felt like a burden, biting at my skin instead of invigorating me.

I'd awakened with a mix of delight and horror. Rousing to find Blanche still nestled in my arms—finding solace and warmth in my embrace—stirred a sense of joy and protectiveness that was entirely new to me. Yet the realization that I'd inadvertently fallen asleep while guarding her from the storm filled me with unease at just how far I'd lost control; while I'd enjoyed an occasional nap in the past when my work was completed and I wanted to relax, this was the first time I had ever fallen asleep unintentionally.

With every gentle rise and fall of her chest, I could feel the subtle shift within me, the softening of my power as warmth begun to seep into my very being, a force I couldn't control no matter how hard I tried, not when that warmth was inextricably tied to her.

I willed the cold to seep back into my heart to freeze the warmth that had taken root, but I knew it was hopeless—she had become a part of me, woven into the very fabric of my existence, and no amount of ice or snow could erase that...nor did I want it to any longer. At the realization, something niggled at the back of my mind, something I should be putting together...but I couldn't quite grasp it.

Everywhere I looked, I noticed unsettling changes. The once-transparent walls were slowly turning cloudy and smooth, as if they were beginning to erode, while

the thick icicles that had once hung from the eaves now dripped steadily, forming small puddles on the floor, their echoes ominous in the grand halls. Each change served as a stark reminder that winter's cold grip was loosening.

Closer examination revealed that the frost that had coated every surface of my crystalline domain was thinning. The once-pristine, icy façade of the castle was showing signs of wear and decay. Patches of ice on the pillars had melted away, leaving exposed sections I would need to repair. When I brushed my fingers against the walls, even in the places the ice remained solid the magic within pulsed faintly, a sign that the enchantment holding it all together was weakening.

Each new sign of winter's loosening grip deepened my anxiety, as if a raging storm had formed inside me, urging me to investigate my realm and see what else was changing. But I hesitated, reluctant to leave Blanche's side, especially after the night she'd spent in the cave during the blizzard. The thought of parting from her filled me with a dread I couldn't quite explain.

As I prepared another makeshift meal for her of roasted fish and winter fruit, I kept glancing her way, watching as she curiously followed my movements. Even though the storm had passed, I felt a constant pull towards her, as if something would happen the moment I looked away.

After she ate, I noticed the dark smudges beneath her eyes, a sign that despite the night's rest in the cave, she was still exhausted. "Would you like to rest for a while?" I suggested.

At her nod, despite her protests that she could find it on her own without difficulty, I led her to the room where the embers of the magical fire still glowed, flickering in the hearth. I added some fresh wood, and then found myself hovering close as she curled up in front of the warm flames, pulling my cloak over her shoulders. As I took slow steps towards the door, my feet paused almost of their own accord, just before I could leave the room.

Blanche sleepily lifted her head to give me a questioning look. My mind raced, searching for an explanation that wasn't admitting I just wanted to stay with her and watch her fall asleep.

"Let me adjust the cloak to more fully cover you." I twitched it half an inch over her feet, pretending that it made a difference.

When I looked back at her face, I found her still watching me, her lips curving softly upward and her eyes filled with trust that caught me by surprise. For a moment our gazes held in a quiet, unspoken understanding, until she whispered a gentle, "Thank you," before nestling deeper into the cloak.

I shifted awkwardly, knowing I should leave, yet I struggled to part from her. As her eyes fluttered shut, I felt an undeniable pull, a quiet, inescapable desire to be closer to her. Without thinking, I leaned down and gently pressed my lips to her forehead.

She sighed softly but didn't open her eyes. I leapt back, horrified. Had I truly been so overcome with emotion that I'd kissed a *mortal*? And worse, had I done it when she was vulnerable, unable to refuse because she hadn't seen me coming?

I stood over her, turmoil swirling inside me, yet at the same time a strange sense of peace settled over me, an emotion that only seemed to exist when I was near her. I thought I noticed a faint smile tugging at her lips. With great effort, I tore myself away, forcing my feet to carry me from the room and into the frigid air of the castle courtyard to see how the rest of my domain fared.

Outside, I was met with another shock. The wind had changed—a mild chinook blew, making the cold air almost bearable, another troubling sign that the world was shifting to spring, as if the very castle itself were trying to thaw despite winter's

claim.

I frowned at the patches of brown, damp earth breaking through the white, and the rivers and streams that had been frozen solid but were now beginning to flow, the faint gurgle of water beneath the ice signaling the return of life—something that had no place in my eternal winter.

I could no longer deny that my powers were waning, allowing spring to encroach upon my domain. If I couldn't restore winter, the consequences would ripple through the natural world and the magical realms. The seasonal rhythm could be thrown off balance, leading to unpredictable weather patterns, prolonged warmth, and even the collapse of the seasonal cycle itself.

With the absence of winter, the environment would suffer: certain plant species might overgrow, disrupting animal hibernation cycles. Plants and animals that relied on the cold could face extinction, and mortals, their agriculture, and their way of life would be threatened by the extremes of a world out of balance.

Spring...a sudden idea sparked. Though each of the Guardians of the Seasons respected the delicate balance of our domains too much to seriously encroach on another's domain, Daisy—the sprightly and mischievous being that ruled Spring—was notorious for her love of pranks. Could it be that this sudden warming was nothing more than one of her elaborate jokes?

As if in answer to my thoughts, a thick curl of green pushed through a bare patch of soil before me, unfurling to reveal the purple blossoms of a crocus. Clenching my teeth, I plucked it from the ground and froze it with a sharp burst of power. Drawing deeper from my magic, I crafted a thin sheet of ice that shimmered with a frosty design not of vines or scrollwork, but with etched words, demanding to know if Daisy was the cause of this unwelcome intrusion in my kingdom.

I froze the crocus to the letter, infusing it with extra power to ensure it wouldn't melt as it left my domain, and with a great effort summoned a wind. To my dismay, what came was a gentle breeze rather than the snow-laden blast I had envisioned. Nevertheless, it carried the note away, vanishing in the direction of Spring. I collapsed to the muddy ground, gasping from the exertion. Minutes passed before I could regain my composure and stand, squinting at the distant horizon where my message had blown.

I paced impatiently, but soon realized I couldn't afford to merely wait. The urgency of my fears stoked my desperation, compelling me to take action. I had already fallen behind in my usual winter preparations due to the time I'd spent caring for my unexpected mortal guest. Now I had to expend even more exhausting effort to recast ancient spells that maintained the icy barriers of my castle and the perpetual winter of my domain. Some of the more complex incantations, rituals, and artifact uses required me to look them up, given how long it had been since I'd needed to wield such powerful magic.

I spent hours reinforcing the structure of my castle, creating new ice pillars, walls, and fortifications to patch up the areas where the ice was eroding. The spells managed to mend several sections that had begun to melt, but I was unsure how long they would hold before weakening again. Despite my efforts, a nagging doubt lingered, making me fear I was fighting a losing battle against something far beyond my control.

I unleashed powerful snowstorms across my domain, desperate to freeze everything solid once again, trying to bury any signs of spring beneath fresh layers of snow. But even as the storms raged, I knew they weren't enough. I tried to summon the fierce, howling gales that had once obeyed my command with a mere thought, but when I reached for that power, all I found was a dull ache in my chest.

The wind came, but this time it was weak, a mere whisper of what it should have been, and it did nothing to deter the encroaching warmth.

I moved to the edge of the frozen lake, the sky above dark and heavy with the thick clouds I'd summoned to block the sun. Yet no matter how much I willed it, the warmth still seeped through, stubbornly defying my efforts. I raised my hand, willing the frost to creep over the thawing ice and coat the surface in a solid sheet of white to halt the progression of spring, an effort that drained me more than it ever had before. For a moment, it obeyed—thin veins of ice spread outward from my fingertips, reclaiming the lake. But then the ice faltered and began to recede, melting away before my eyes.

Exhaustion hit me like a wave, and I had to catch myself on the trunk of a nearby pine to keep from collapsing. My chest heaved, each breath more labored than the last, the cold air resistant, as if it too were slipping from my grasp. The frost that usually danced in the air around me had diminished, barely clinging to my presence.

What was happening to me?

I tried to collect myself, but the world around me tilted, spinning slightly as if rejecting my very presence. The cold that served as my strength and my identity was slipping away, just like the ice that now melted at my touch. My heart pounded in a frantic rhythm and I couldn't catch my breath, suffocating in the very element that had once been my sanctuary.

As I bent over, fighting for breath, a warm breeze carrying the sweet scent of daffodils caressed my cheek. Floating towards me was a small scroll of birch bark, tied with a fresh yellow bloom that remained vibrant in the ever more temperate air.

Snatching it up, I hastily tore the daffodil away and unrolled the bark, hoping for an explanation...but the few lines that greeted me made my heart sink.

*Frost, I appreciate your belief that I have both time and magic to spare in tormenting you while I'm preparing the world for Spring's arrival, but whatever is ailing your kingdom must be your doing, not mine. Daisy*

I crumpled the scroll, frustration tightening in my chest. If this wasn't Daisy's handiwork or anyone else's magic either, the answer had to lie within me. I simply needed to regain control. I clenched my fists, willing my power to return, but all I felt was the sting of defeat creeping in like the warmth I'd fought so hard to keep at bay. Winter was slipping away from me, and with it everything I'd ever known, the power that once defined me now feeling like a distant memory.

I'd been created to be Winter's keeper, to protect the force that sustained the balance between life and death, cold and warmth. Yet now I watched my realm thaw before my very eyes. With every patch of melting snow and droplet of ice that dripped from my formerly impenetrable castle, I felt my purpose slipping away; the winter I'd nurtured and the world I'd shaped across the expanse of forever was unraveling, and no matter how much I tried to regain control, I couldn't seem to hold it together.

I closed my eyes, trying to center myself, but all I could feel was the warmth on the horizon, an unstoppable force that no amount of willpower could hold back. It brought with it the inescapable truth I would do anything to deny: spring was coming, and I feared I was powerless to stop it. I was supposed to be Winter incarnate, the eternal, immortal embodiment of cold, but now, with spring encroaching upon my realm, I had never felt so human.

As I staggered back to my ice castle, exhaustion weighed heavily on my shoulders, and a chilling realization settled over me, insidious and undeniable—the frost that once responded effortlessly to my will was slipping through my fingers

like grains of sand. The unnatural thaw in my realm pointed to one source, the catalyst that had set this chain of unwanted events in motion.

*Her.*

Unbidden, my thoughts once more drifted towards the mortal whose soul I was meant to claim who had somehow woven herself into the fabric of my existence. From the beginning, I knew her presence was dangerous, a disruption to the delicate balance that maintained the cycle of seasons. Yet I had chosen to blind myself to the truth...because I didn't want to lose her.

But now, standing in the shadow of my castle, watching the once-immaculate ice walls glisten with the threat of melting, I could no longer deny she was likely the reason winter was weakening. If I wanted to reclaim my fading powers and restore balance, there was only one solution.

I had to claim her soul.

The thought twisted cruelly in my gut. Claiming her soul would restore the cycle, reassert my dominion over winter, and drive back the encroaching warmth that threatened to undo everything I'd built, securing my place as the embodiment of winter and preserving the world as it was meant to be.

But it would also mean losing her forever.

I'd taken comfort so far in the belief that I was not yet able to take her soul; the ancient magic I'd encountered in the alley had prevented my sincere efforts. Yet now as I surveyed my vanishing kingdom, the realization slammed into me with force. In the cave I hadn't consciously understood it, but as I replayed the scene in my mind I saw with painful clarity that the barrier that had protected Blanche's soul from my power was gone. Nothing was keeping me from moving forward with my task except my own reluctance.

My thoughts whirled, trying to find an explanation for why her soul had been unavailable when she froze, but now that she was recovering—both physically and emotionally—it was procurable.

After much thought an idea came to mind: I knew that whatever had prevented me from fulfilling my duty earlier had been a powerful magic woven into the fabric of the world, not a mere conflict with another seasonal spirit or a glitch in my powers. The showcase of Blanche's life had offered insight into a life of startling neglect amidst luxury; it had become increasingly clear with each new scene that not a single person in her life truly cared about her.

Closing my eyes, I thought back to the tomes on mortals and the magical structure of the earth I'd studied at the beginning of my existence. One line stood out to me now: *The experience of love is the hallmark of humanity and the birthright of every person.*

Could that mean that Blanche's soul was bound to life because her birthright had been denied to her, that her soul could not be severed from her body until she experienced someone caring for her? If so...I wasn't sure I wanted to consider what it signified that her soul was now free for my taking.

I clenched my fists, feeling the icy chill of my power flicker weakly in response, barely a whisper of what it once was. The more I tried to will it back, the more I realized how much she had come to mean to me, awakening something I didn't even know I was capable of feeling. She had melted the walls of ice I'd built around my heart, bringing warmth and light into a life that had always been defined by cold and darkness...and apparently doing the same for my entire realm.

I couldn't bear the thought of losing her, but if I didn't do what was necessary, the balance of nature would unravel. I had a role that extended beyond my own desires, for I was Winter, a season that couldn't exist without death. Yet if I fulfilled



my duty and claimed her soul, I would lose the one thing that had ever made me feel truly alive.

I stood there, torn between two choices, each leading to a different kind of death. Whichever I chose, something precious would be lost forever. The ice beneath my feet cracked slightly, a reminder of the fragility of the world I was struggling to protect.

The winds began to die down, but for the first time in my existence, I found no comfort in the cold—it felt distant, as if the very essence of winter was slipping away from me. The warmth that had seeped into my heart, brought there by her presence, now threatened to consume me entirely.

I knew the choice I had to make, but the sense of loss gnawed at me, sharper than any blade of ice. My sense of self—once as solid as the frozen ground beneath my feet—seemed to be crumbling, fear gripping me with cold, unyielding hands.

Who was I if the season I commanded withered under my care?

The weakened frost that once effortlessly flowed through me left me adrift, as if the essence of my identity had been stripped away. The more my power weakened, the more my desperation grew, until it became a relentless force I could no longer ignore, urging me to do anything to reclaim the raw force of winter coursing through my veins.

Desperation burning in my chest, I descended to Earth, seeking the one place where I'd always felt in control: the skies. I took to the air, my emotions a turbulent storm as I searched for a way to prove to myself that I was still the master of ice and snow.

The moment my feet touched the ground, dark clouds gathered, a mirror of my turmoil. I reached out to the elements with what remained of my power, demanding they respond as they always had. The wind howled in answer and the temperature dropped, the air around me growing sharp with cold.

But it wasn't enough. I pushed harder, forcing my will upon the sky, and the first shards of ice began to fall. Hailstones, small at first, tumbled from the heavens, striking the earth with a force that echoed my growing despair. Still, I needed more—more cold, more ice, more proof that I hadn't lost everything.

The hail intensified, the stones growing larger, harder, driven by the fury of a storm I could barely control. They pounded the ground, a relentless barrage that scarred the earth in its wake. The storm spiraled, feeding off my deep-seated need to prove that I still possessed the power that had always given meaning to my existence.

Yet as I watched the wild, uncontrolled force smash into the earth, I found no satisfaction, only a hollow ache that confirmed I was losing more than just my power...I was losing myself.

The realization calmed my surge of emotions just enough for the storm to wane, the hailstones dwindling as the last vestiges of my strength faltered. I dropped to my knees, the cold earth beneath me doing little to ground me in the reality of what I'd done.

As the storm's fury subsided and the last remnants of ice fell from the sky, a heavy stillness settled over the landscape; the world grew eerily quiet, as if nature held its breath, waiting to see what I'd do next. Yet in this moment, I had no more power to draw upon.

In the silence, my thoughts turned to the mortal woman who had disrupted my world. Despite the havoc she'd wrought on my powers, the very thought of her soothed the edges of my despair—not the comfort that came with the cold, indifferent strength of winter but with something entirely different, something

warmer, softer. The memory of her touch, the sound of her voice, the way she looked at me as if I was more than just a force of nature left my soul craving for her, the only one in this moment who seemed to possess the power to calm the storm raging inside me.

Suddenly I couldn't bear to be apart from her for another moment, and I hastily created a portal to return to my castle. As if the cold from the furious storm I'd created had extended its reach even to here, the repairs in winter's grip I had made over my realm maintained their hold, pushing back the hints of spring I'd previously detected. Yet my relief was tempered by fear that this reprieve was only temporary, a fleeting victory before the encroachment of spring would return to threaten my realm.

I pushed open the towering front doors, but before I could take more than a few steps inside, I was suddenly overwhelmed by a warm embrace that nearly knocked me off my feet. Blanche flung herself at me, her arms wrapping tightly around me with a force that belied her delicate frame. In that instant, all my concerns about winter's fragile hold and my own weakening magic vanished, replaced by the immediacy of her presence.

"What is it? Are you alright?" My arm instinctively wound around her, pulling her closer as if it were the most natural thing in the world—even more than the magic that used to flow effortlessly through me. With my free hand, I gently stroked her cheeks, searching for any lingering cold that might still cling to her skin. Relief surged through me as her body heat spread across my touch, warm and soothing.

"After I awoke, I couldn't find you anywhere. I searched the entire castle." Her voice trembled slightly, and the worry in her eyes was unmistakable.

"I'm sorry," I murmured, guilt tightening my chest. "I had a storm to create. I meant to return before you awoke." I hadn't expected her to wake so soon, and in my panicked distraction, I'd lost track of time.

Shyness seemed to have stolen the rest of her voice. Instead her arms tightened around me, holding on as if I might disappear again at any moment. The desperation I'd previously felt in my struggles to maintain my hold over winter shifted in an instant; the changing of the seasons seemed insignificant compared to the distress she'd felt in my absence.

When she finally tipped her head back to look at me, the relief in her glassy eyes thawed the cold grip around my heart, as if spring itself had found its way not only to my kingdom, but inside me. Instead of the usual dread that accompanied it, instead I felt...comforted, as if her gaze had reached inside to melt away the fears that had consumed me, rendering them trivial in the face of her concern.

"You missed me?" The hope in my voice was unmistakable, a raw vulnerability that I hadn't allowed myself to feel in ages. Her shy nod sent a wave of warmth through me, helping me to finally identify the restless emotion that had plagued me since our separation...something much deeper than my anxiety about my powers undeniably tied to her.

A subtle pinch squeezed my heart. "I missed you too." The cold I had so desperately clung to felt insignificant in comparison to the warmth she offered so freely, a warmth that I never expected would feel more attractive than my native cold.

In her arms—the very last place I would have thought to look—I found the sense of purpose that had been slipping away from me, like ice melting in the sun. Her presence restored something inside of me that I hadn't even realized was missing, a connection that went beyond mere survival or duty...a new strength that didn't rely on the power of winter, but on the joy she brought into my life and the

growing affection I nurtured for her.

## CHAPTER 12



### *Blanche*

The subtle shifts I'd noticed throughout Frost's realm grew more pronounced the more I wandered through the vast labyrinthine corridors. The cold, elegant sanctuary, seemed to morph before my eyes. The pristine, intricate ice carvings that had adorned the halls were melting into abstract patterns, revealing hints of the stone or earth beneath.

The air inside the icy castle, once as frigid as the heart of winter, had grown noticeably warmer. A faint, almost balmy breeze occasionally drifted through the corridors, carrying the scent of thawing earth and blooming flowers—a fragrance completely foreign to Frost's realm. The magical light that once glowed with a cold, blue luminescence now dimmed, taking on a warmer, more golden hue reminiscent of sunlight during early spring. Much as I loved the idea of spring and warmth, it seemed a jarring inconsistency, as though it was inherently wrong to find such things in the heart of winter.

As I moved deeper into the castle, I took note of the changes. In the corners of the castle where frost had once stubbornly clung, small signs of life were beginning to emerge—tiny green shoots breaking through cracks in the frozen ground and delicate, frost-kissed blossoms blooming with petals tinged in the soft pastels of spring: pale pinks, gentle yellows, and light purples.

In the mornings, where a thick layer of frost had once blanketed every surface, now only a light dew glistened in the first light of day, further proof that the season was beginning to shift. The distant sound of birdsong now filled the once silent arctic air, a harbinger of the encroaching spring and another undeniable sign that winter was slowly slipping away.

I shivered, not from the cold, but from the eerie silence that filled the empty spaces. Despite Frost's earlier assurances when I'd greeted him upon his return several hours ago, I couldn't dispel my unease that something was wrong. Eventually my worry had urged me to seek him out not long after he'd departed to perform his winter duties.

"Frost? Are you here?" My voice echoed off the ice-covered walls, but there was no response. I called for him again, but each time my voice grew fainter as I ventured farther, an involuntary hush falling over me with each step. I couldn't shake the worry that he might be lost somewhere in his own domain as it crumbled around him.

While there was still so much I didn't know about Frost or the magic he wielded, the concern I'd detected earlier had been enough to understand that whatever was happening was beyond normalcy—something was profoundly wrong.

The longer I wandered the castle without finding him, the deeper my worry grew—more acute than anything I'd felt during the days I'd spent struggling to survive on the streets. I couldn't understand how I could care more for someone else's well-being than my own, especially after such a short time...and when it was his duty to allow winter to complete the work it had begun in the alley.

But seeing the evidence of his powers weakening all around me, I began to understand why it was imperative for him to claim my soul. I pressed my hand to my chest, as if I could keep all that made me who I was in one piece. I no longer felt the same apprehension I once had at the thought of losing myself if it would help the only man who had ever shown me kindness, even as despair welled within me at the thought of being parted from him forever now that I finally had something worth living for.

My heart twinged, as if trying to convey an unspoken message, but I hastily dismissed it. Desperation was causing me to become confused; this denial battled with my sense as I continued exploring the castle.

I came upon a chamber I hadn't explored before filled with old, ornate furniture covered in a thin layer of frost. The walls were lined with shelves holding various artifacts—crystals, ancient scrolls, and weathered books. Though a quick glance revealed Frost wasn't present here either, I found myself drawn closer, guided by an unspoken desire to learn more about him.

Seeking answers, I approached one of the shelves and ran my fingers over a dusty tome. Opening it revealed detailed sketches of ice formations and snowflakes, accompanied by notes written in a flowing script that spoke of the intricacies of seasonal magic, the delicate balance required to sustain it, and the ancient rituals of winter.

Next to the tome, a crystal vial containing a shimmering blue liquid caught my eye, likely a potion or magical essence. I wondered if it was something Frost used to maintain his powers, or perhaps a relic from his long existence. Each item seemed to whisper fragments of his past, hinting at a life lived in solitude, surrounded by the endless winter he had created and maintained.

I was reminded of my own mortality as I moved around the room; even without the time counting down until Frost was required to complete his duty, my life was diminutive in comparison to the eons he'd lived and worked to keep the world as it should be.

As I explored further, I stumbled upon a large, frost-covered mirror. Wiping away the ice revealed not my reflection but a shadowy figure with an ethereal glow—a representation of Frost, but not as I knew him. An aura of cold fire surrounded his regal form, a reminder of the immense power he wielded. I drew back slightly, too curious to look away but too awed to stay close.

The flickering image shifted to reveal glimpses of Frost's past. This mirror appeared to be more than just a reflective surface; similar to the showcase of my memories Frost had shown me earlier, it seemed to capture moments of his history, a window into his past lives and the solitude he had endured.

I watched as the swirling images sharpened, steadying to reveal Frost standing atop a mountain, his hands raised as he summoned a blizzard with nothing more than a thought. Concentration furrowed his expression, his eyes glowing with an otherworldly light as he shaped the storm, guiding it across the land with a mastery that seemed effortless. I shivered as I imagined the whine of the wind and the stinging blow of each tiny shard of ice whipping through the air, but Frost stood serene and untouched in the midst of the storm as he watched it do his bidding. Snow and ice obeyed his every command, and soon the landscape below was

covered in a thick, glistening blanket of white, a testament to his control over the elements.

The scene changed to show Frost in a different time and place. He stood alone in a vast, frozen wasteland, the wind howling around him as he walked through the snow, no longer leaving any footprints behind. His face was solemn and his eyes distant, as if the weight of eternity pressed upon him. He paused at the edge of a frozen lake, staring into the ice as if searching for something—perhaps a glimpse of himself in the reflection, or a reminder of who he had once been before winter became his only companion...if such a time existed at all.

Another image flickered into view, showing Frost crouched in a dark alley, much like the one where he had found me. He bent over what at first glance appeared to be a heap of rags. But as I looked closer, I realized it was the lifeless body of an old man. Frost extended a hand and a swirl of shimmering blue magic flowed over the man's body like a gentle river. Deep within, a tiny golden spark flickered, slowly rising from the body and floating along the stream of magic towards Frost's outstretched hand.

The moment the spark touched his fingertip, a burst of white light enveloped him, and he inhaled deeply, as if drawing the essence into himself. The light faded, but he remained kneeling a moment longer, carefully scooping a handful of snow from the man's body into a small vial, no doubt preserving the man's memories. With a slight nod of respect towards the fallen soul that had become part of nature's delicate balance, Frost vanished into the night. My breath caught as I watched, realizing this was a glimpse into my own future.

The mirror's surface rippled again, this time showing Frost in battle, his powers clashing against another elemental force—perhaps a spirit of fire or a being of sunlight. The air around him crackled with energy as he courageously defended his realm, the ice responding to his every command with ferocity. Yet even in the midst of combat, there was a sense of weariness about him, as if he had fought these battles countless times before, each one taking a little more from him.

As I continued to gaze into the mirror, a new scene emerged, this time pulling me into the present. The reflection shifted to the outside world, revealing the landscape surrounding the ice castle. The once-serene winter wonderland was now caught in the throes of a violent hailstorm. Jagged chunks of ice pelted the ground with brutal force, shattering the delicate balance of snow and frost. The trees, once laden with soft, powdery snow, now groaned under the weight of thick ice, their branches cracking and breaking in the relentless storm.

The sight was both awe-inspiring and heartbreaking. As if the magic within the mirror had silently conveyed a wordless description of the event, I recognized this as the aftermath of Frost's desperate attempt to cling to his powers, a manifestation of the turmoil he could no longer contain—an outward display of the inner conflict tearing him apart. The hailstorm was not just a force of nature; it was a reflection of Frost's anguish, his struggle against the inevitable change that threatened to take everything he had known and held dear.

Finally, the mirror settled on a scene that tugged at my heart. Frost stood in a forest at the edge of winter's reach, watching as spring began to creep forward, melting the snow and bringing life back to the earth. His face was a mask of resignation, his hand outstretched as if trying to hold back the inevitable change. But no matter how powerful he was, he couldn't stop the cycle of the seasons. Though the ice eventually retreated, with it a piece of him seemed to fade, leaving him standing alone in the burgeoning warmth of spring.

As each image unfolded, I began to better understand the depth of Frost's burden. He was not merely a being of ice and cold; he was a guardian of winter, tasked with maintaining a delicate balance that often left him isolated, battling forces beyond his control. The mirror showed me not just his power, but the silent pain of an existence defined by duty and the passage of time...a loneliness I yearned to alleviate.

The final image eventually faded to leave only my own reflection. I felt closer to the man I'd come to know who had been shaped by all of these moments—his strength, his solitude, and especially his sorrow. Frost was more than a figure of ice; he was a soul who had endured more than I could have imagined, and who now faced a challenge that threatened to unravel everything he had fought to preserve.

My heart ached as I realized how deeply Frost's identity was intertwined with the magic he controlled. Each unfolding scene revealed a man who'd spent an eternity maintaining an unending winter, preserving a world that had slowly begun to unravel.

With each memory, the sheer magnitude of his eternal life settled over me, bringing a deep sadness at how unchanging he and the events around him had remained, with little to mark the vast stretch of time he'd endured. In his eyes, I'd seen a glimmer of sadness—a profound loneliness that could never be filled, no matter how impressive his achievements. Despite the grandeur of his castle, with its shimmering ice chandeliers and snowflakes suspended in eternal dance, it was devoid of life, a beautiful yet chilling prison that kept him forever isolated from the world beyond.

Uncovering the intricate details that wove the fabric of Frost's existence only deepened my desire to see him again. Leaving behind the room filled with artifacts representing the mysteries I still longed to solve, I wandered the cold, empty corridors in search of him.

I hadn't been walking long when a faint, high-pitched sound reached my ears. At first, I dismissed it as the wind whistling through the cracks in the ice, but it gradually grew more insistent, almost melodic, like the tinkling of tiny bells.

I paused, listening intently, and realized with a start that the sound wasn't random notes of the season—whispers of words emerged half-formed in my mind, as if the winter itself were trying to speak. A shiver of recognition and understanding rippled up my spine.

Somehow, the winter magic was reaching out to me, a paradox to the gradual thaw spreading throughout Frost's realm. Did this represent the breakdown of Frost's power causing his magic to somehow become accessible to mortals, or was something different happening to me?

I noticed more subtle changes in myself as I continued through the castle; I felt as if something had shifted within me, and the air around me felt different, sharper. The cold—which had once been a constant, biting presence—now felt almost comforting, as if the frost and snow were welcoming me, wrapping me in their embrace. It was as though winter itself had taken up residence within me, offering protection from the very cold that had once threatened my life.

As I brushed my fingers against the walls, I noticed that wherever my hand lingered, a thin layer of frost formed, delicate patterns spreading across the surface like intricate lace. The objects I touched grew cold beneath my fingertips, the warmth of my skin replaced by a sudden, brief chill. The frost would fade after a moment, but the realization that I could now wield even a fraction of Frost's magic sent a wave of confusion and conflicting emotions through me.

The only possible explanation my whirling thoughts could conjure was that the deeper understanding I'd gained of Frost through his memories in the magical mirror along with my continued presence in his realm seemed to have forged a deeper connection between us, intertwining my essence with his and the winter he commanded.

Was this connection a gift given after we'd drawn closer, or a curse that meant that the very powers Frost seemed to be losing were now manifesting within me? Dread coiled my stomach as I considered another possibility: Frost had thus far failed in his duty to claim my soul. Could winter itself be working to complete the task, infiltrating me with its magic until it could seize what it was owed?

The questions seemed magnified in the castle's eerie silence that pressed down on me as I continued my search for Frost, driven by a deeper urgency to find him. He needed to know what was happening, and I needed to understand what this new bond meant for both of us. I reached up to touch my forehead where his lips had briefly pressed as I drifted off to sleep, smiling at the memory. Affection had been so absent from my life that the simple kiss had become one of the brightest moments of my existence.

I suddenly felt the chill of the ice beneath my feet and the faint echoes of winter's voice in my mind, growing stronger within me as I searched, guiding my steps as I moved through the castle's changing halls. My quest eventually led me to a small chamber with a large window overlooking the realm, a landscape of melting ice and encroaching greenery, the once-gleaming expanse now a patchwork of thawing ice and sprouting shoots. I could almost feel Frost's struggle, a war against the natural cycle that he could not fully control.

I noticed a door slightly ajar at the far end of the room. I pushed it open and found Frost sitting on a now-misshapen stool by an icy window ledge, his back to me and his shoulders hunched forward. The sight of him once more alone, with his usual commanding presence diminished, tugged at my heart.

He slowly faced me, his eyes weary yet not unwelcoming. "You found me." A mixture of relief and resignation filled his weak tone, accompanying the distant sound of the hailstorm that still echoed faintly in my mind, a testament to the turmoil and struggle Frost had unleashed in his desperation.

I edged farther into the room. "I've been looking for you. I've seen the changes in the castle, and I sensed you've been troubled."

"I didn't mean to hide. There's just so much changing." He stared at me a moment before tipping his head in a beckoning gesture, silently inviting me to join him.

I drew closer and settled beside him, the cold of the ledge beneath me seeping through my skirts. "I discovered some things about your magic...and your past. I now better understand how much winter means to you, as well as how much you've sacrificed to preserve it."

His sigh was like a gust of icy wind. "I've never had a chance to share any part of myself or my world with someone...until you. Have I forever shattered the illusion of the enigmatic winter king?"

I carefully arranged my thoughts over what winter's magic had shown me. "Immortality always seemed like an element out of the fairytales I loved as a child, but experiencing a glimpse of yours through your eyes made me realize how isolating and unchanging it's been for you."

"A solitude mirrored in the memories of your own life," he replied.

It amazed me how the vastly different tapestries that made up our separate existences could share this common thread, a bridge that brought us closer with



each passing day. There was so much more I wanted to ask him, especially after glimpsing the storm he'd recently created. I'd felt a portion of his pain in each hailstone, as if each shard of ice cut a piece of his heart, leaving a permanent indent that I was desperate to heal.

He tilted his head, studying me, as if analyzing the loneliness that had likely compelled me to seek him out. But beyond filling the void in my heart—one that his presence these past several days had begun to heal—it was our deepening connection that had drawn me to him, the joy I felt in his company magnified beyond anything I'd ever known before our meeting.

Yet despite the growing connection I felt to Frost and his magic, I couldn't shake the deep loneliness that had been my constant companion long before I ever set foot in this icy domain, an emotion I sensed could only be alleviated by him, one who understood more than anyone else what it felt like to be alone.

As if sensing my unspoken feelings, his expression softened, his eyes reflecting an understanding that made my heart ache. In the quiet his gaze spoke volumes, as if he could see straight into my soul and sense the loneliness that lingered there... one he himself was well-acquainted with.

He suddenly extended his hand, a swirl of icy mist gathering in his palm. I watched, entranced, as the mist solidified, forming into a delicate, shimmering creature made entirely of ice. It was small, about the size and shape of a fox, with crystalline fur that caught the light in a thousand dazzling facets. Its icy eyes glowed with a warm, gentle light, and its movements were graceful, almost ethereal.

The creature padded over to me, its steps silent on the frozen floor. It nuzzled my hand with its cool nose, a soft, almost purring sound emanating from deep within its chest. I knelt down, gently running my fingers through its frosty fur, marveling at how lifelike it felt despite being crafted from winter's cold.

"For you," Frost said quietly, his weak voice from the effort like a whisper of snowflakes. "In case you ever need some company when I can't provide it for you."

I looked up at him, my heart swelling with a mix of emotions I couldn't quite name. The gesture was simple, yet it meant more to me than I could express. He had seen my loneliness, felt it as deeply as I did, and without needing to hear the words had chosen to ease it in the only way he knew how. It was a kindness I hadn't expected, a sign that he understood me more than I'd realized.

"Thank you," I whispered, my voice thick with emotion as my fingers curled into the frosty strands of the animal's fur. The little creature nuzzled against me again, its icy fur somehow comforting despite its cold nature. "It's perfect."

Frost's lips curved into a faint smile, but I could see the hint of something deeper in his eyes—a concern along with a quiet resignation. I realized that creating this companion for me might have come at a cost, that in choosing to comfort me he was willing to further risk unsettling the balance he'd fought so hard to maintain. Yet he had done it regardless, a proof of how deeply he cared that I hadn't expected.

As the ice creature curled up beside me, I felt a warmth that had nothing to do with temperature. Frost had given me a gift, not just of companionship but of understanding, one made more special when it reminded me of the one who'd created it, the most precious thing to me of anything in this frozen world.

I burrowed my fingers in its soft fur. "Can I bring it with me after you gather my soul?"

Though I meant the question innocently, he flinched at the unwanted reminder of his duty that we did our best to keep unspoken between us. "I've collected countless souls over my existence, yet I myself don't know what lies beyond." His

gaze sought the vast view of the sky outside, as if trying to see beyond to discover the answer to this unknown mystery.

The shift in mood served as an unwanted reminder to the truths I'd been doing my best to forget. Though I welcomed his touching gift, a small part of me couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness. His creation of a companion to fill the void in my heart was a tangible reminder of the inevitable expiration date hanging over our tentative relationship. Our time together was nothing more than a fleeting dream that would eventually come to an unwanted end, a reminder that mortals and immortal beings could never truly be together...an unspoken desire I was slowly starting to recognize filling my heart.

Seeing the subtle yet undeniable signs of spring slowly consuming his realm, I couldn't shake the guilt gnawing at me at the fact that my presence was bringing unnatural changes to a season that had remained constant since the dawn of time. I knew I couldn't be selfish enough to disrupt everything that made him who he was, let alone risk the fate of the entire world.

My exploration of the castle had revealed glimpses of his eternity, an existence shaped long before we met and one that would continue long after I was gone. A being with infinite time and endless forever had no need for a relationship with a mortal woman who was only just beginning to understand what it meant to truly live and love.

I needed to cherish the portion of his existence where he had made room for me. He had given me something precious—a companion born from his magic, an act that showed how deeply he understood me. Even more precious, he had shown me care, consideration, and true friendship, a priceless gift to end my years of emotional starvation with days of knowing that I was seen and even cherished. Now I wanted to do something for him in return, not just out of gratitude but because I wanted to cheer him up in the same way he'd comforted me. But what could I offer a being who had lived forever and seemed to possess everything?

"Is there anything that you want?" I asked hesitantly, unsure if my simple question could even reach the depths of someone as timeless as him.

"My gift was given without condition of needing to receive something in return." He paused, considering my words. "Actually, there is something—I want to get to know you better."

I blinked, surprised by his response. I had seen his vast library, filled with the collected knowledge of the countless souls he had taken over the ages. "Haven't you experienced enough human lifetimes?"

He shook his head slightly, a soft smile playing on his lips. "While their knowledge has become a part of me, there's a difference between observing and experiencing something firsthand. Not to mention all of those souls have one thing in common—they're not *yours*. There's something different about you, something unexplored that I want to better understand."

My heart fluttered with a joy so pure it almost hurt. Did this mean he felt the same curiosity that had guided my exploration through his castle, the same yearning to know more about him? The possibility that he wanted to know me as desperately as I longed to discover more about him filled me with unexpected warmth, a hope that perhaps, despite everything, there might be a future for us after all.

## CHAPTER 13



The cozy corner of Frost's ice castle was bathed in the gentle glow of the firelight, a welcome contrast to the cold, crystalline grandeur surrounding us. It felt like a small haven, a pocket of warmth amidst the endless winter—a place where, for just a little while, I could bring a piece of my past and experience a sense of tranquility that had been absent for so long.

The scent of mint and chocolate filled the air as I stood with Frost beside the small hearth we had been able to prepare with magic in the cold palace; the golden flames crackled, dancing against the glimmering walls. The heat from the hearth created a delicate balance with the ever-present chill of the castle, one that mirrored the fragile state of our deepening relationship.

Frost stood nearby, his expression inscrutable save for the subtle flicker of curiosity as I arranged the ingredients. Our fingers brushed as I handed him a mixing bowl carved from ice, sending a soft jolt of warmth through me, the coldness of the bowl a stark contrast to the heat that radiated from where our skin touched.

I held up a small canister of cocoa powder. "Mint hot cocoa and gingerbread were always my favorite winter treats. My governess used to prepare them for me on the coldest days." I felt a pang of nostalgia as I spoke, along with a sense of sadness that the one person who had shown me moments of kindness had been paid to do so rather than genuinely caring about me.

My plans to share this portion of my past extended beyond yearning to express my gratitude. Though he'd witnessed my memories, I wanted to add brushstrokes of my thoughts and feelings to the otherwise colorless facts, filling them in one by one so he could learn to know me on a deeper level...as well as show him that that even in the sorrow and pain of mortality, there were moments of joy and meaning.

I couldn't explain this growing need when my life would be only one of the infinite souls he'd gathered throughout his time as the king of winter; I only knew that I wanted to be remembered by him forever, a longing deeper than I could put into words.

His eyes lit up with a spark of interest. "You mean there was something about winter you loved?"

"They brought comfort. When everything else felt too harsh, these treats made the cold more bearable." I knew this portion of my past wouldn't erase the aching loneliness he'd endured over his eternity, but hoped it might give him a flicker of warmth to carry with him, long after my soul passed on.

A hint of a smile tugged on his mouth, as if he was pleased I'd found something in his season to bring me joy. Though his gaze softened as he looked at me, his brow furrowed as he mulled over my words. "Comfort," he echoed, as if the word itself was foreign to him.

Fitting as the word was to describe this moment, it somehow seemed inadequate for the emotions swelling inside me. I shook my head to dispel the errant thought and offered him an ice-carved whisk, the frosty handle no longer cold to the touch but now familiar and comfortable against my skin.

At my touch small tendrils of frost swirled from my palm, twining along the handle. The frost responded to my touch instinctively now, as if it were part of me.

Frost froze, his eyes widening in both surprise and fascination. "That's new," he murmured, his voice a mix of curiosity and concern.

My heart pounded, unsure how to explain what was happening. "It started yesterday." I ran my hand along the frost-covered surface of the table, watching in awe as the icy tendrils curled beneath my fingers, extending and shimmering like winter's own breath. "Every time I touch something cold, it reacts to me." I lifted my hand from the table and watched the frost swirl and dissipate.

Frost stepped closer, his gaze locked on my hand. "Magic should be impossible for mortals to wield on their own. You've never experienced anything like this before?" His voice was low, tinged with disbelief.

I shook my head. "It's only begun since I entered your realm after we frosted the windowpanes together."

He was silent a long moment, eyes flickering between my hand and the thin layer of ice lingering against the frozen surface. "Perhaps," he murmured, more to himself than to me, "you're beginning to absorb the magic of winter. Though my power is fading, yours..." He trailed off, but the unspoken possibility lingered in the air between us.

We spent several minutes discussing why this power might be manifesting and experimenting with the strange new magic, but neither of us were sure what it signified, a fact which was both intriguing and troubling. Eventually we sought a distraction from the strange mystery in the treat we were concocting. I pushed through the sense of foreboding pressing against my chest and forced a cheery tone.

"Comfort is not just about the taste—it's the warmth, the memories, and the feeling of being safe and cared for." Though I'd had little experience with this elusive emotion prior to coming to his winter realm, thanks to him I'd been able to discover it, even amongst all of the ice and snow.

His cool fingers brushed against mine as he took the whisk. As I leaned closer, the heat from the hearth paled in comparison to the warmth that bloomed in my chest. My shoulder brushed his as I adjusted his grip and a shiver traveled down my spine—not from the cold, but from the undeniable attraction I felt in his presence. I could feel his gaze on me, intense and searching, as if also aware of the charged atmosphere between us whose small distance felt like a fragile barrier, one that I wasn't sure I wanted to maintain.

My shallow, flustered breaths came a little quicker as I leaned in his direction to demonstrate how to mix the cocoa with the warm milk, adding just the right amount of mint for that refreshing yet soothing flavor. I couldn't help but laugh at his intense concentration as he stirred, his brow furrowed as he approached this simple task like he would conjuring a snowstorm, seriousness I found increasingly endearing.

"You're whisking too hard," I teased, reaching out to guide his hand, our fingers briefly intertwining; a spark of warmth spread through me at the touch. He relaxed, his expression softening with a rare, genuine smile, though the chocolate mixture was in danger of spilling as we found ourselves gazing at each other rather than our work.

“The creator of infinite snowflakes, and yet I cannot brew a simple drink,” he mused, his voice touched with humor.

“Give it a few millennia and I’m sure you’ll have the hang of it,” I teased in response.

With every turn of the whisk, I realized he was stirring something much more powerful than the comfort brought by a soothing drink—feelings I couldn’t quite name, but which deepened in my heart with each passing moment.

As if to remind me of Frost’s kindness that melted my heart, I felt a cool nose nudge my palm affectionately and looked down to see the muzzle of my ice fox, Shiver, nestling my hand as its crystalline eyes stared up at me pleadingly, hoping for a taste.

“We haven’t even baked the cookies yet.” I ruffled its fur with a laugh, bemused as always by the musical tinkling that sounded as the icy strands rubbed against each other.

As I sifted through the bags of ingredients Frost had gathered, my eyes caught sight of a familiar stamp on one of the sacks. It was a simple, circular mark, slightly faded with age but unmistakable—the emblem of a small bakery I had frequently passed after finding myself on the streets.

The memory surged back with startling clarity—another cold winter evening measured by my gnawing hunger when the scent of fresh bread drifted through the frigid air. I stood outside that bakery, face pressed against the frosted glass, staring longingly at the loaves lined up on the shelves, each one feeling impossibly out of reach.

As if my desperation had drawn her attention, the kindly older baker noticed me lingering. The warmth from her shop followed her as she stepped outside. I shrank back, prepared for a harsh admonition to leave the premises, but without a word she handed me a brown paper sack with flour-dusted hands, the contents still warm and fragrant.

“Leftover bread,” she’d said, her voice gruff but kind. “Can’t let it go to waste now, can we?”

I clutched the bag to my chest, tears springing to my eyes as its heat seeped into my cold fingers. It wasn’t just the bread that warmed me—it was the unexpected kindness, the simple act of generosity I hadn’t anticipated...one I felt I didn’t deserve considering how little I’d extended it to others back when the circumstances had favored me. In a world that had often felt harsh and unforgiving, her small act served as a beacon of light, a rare balm in the poverty-stricken life I’d endured.

Now, as I stood in Frost’s kitchen tracing the worn stamp on the flour sack while the memory of that cold winter evening played vividly in my mind, I was filled with a deep sense of gratitude. The memory of the baker’s simple act of kindness stirred something within me that I hadn’t felt in a long time—a desire to be better, to see the world and the people in it not just as obstacles or threats, but as individuals with their own needs and struggles.

For the first time, I saw the baker in my memory not just as a nameless figure who had shown me mercy, but as a person with her own hardships who had chosen to help a hungry girl when she easily could have turned me away.

In my life I’d met very few people—myself included—who acted out of anything other than selfish desire. My parents were known for their supposed charity, but it only served to curry favor and boost their image. My peers had all been in open competition for the highest positions in society, using favors only as a means to help themselves climb higher. I winced at the memory of how I myself

had rejected a potential suitor the moment a more eligible gentleman looked my way.

But the baker was proof that not everyone was so self-centered and cruelly ambitious. My heart swelled with both thankfulness and the realization that I wanted to carry that spirit of kindness forward, a desire that contrasted with the person I used to be but which felt more like the Blanche I had been searching for.

I had spent so long focused on surviving each day without being swallowed by the world's cruelty that I'd forgotten the world wasn't entirely dark. Like crocuses whose resilience pushed through snow each spring, there were people who chose kindness no matter the circumstances. The memory of those warm buns, given freely without expectation of anything in return, had stayed with me all this time, helping me realize how much I wanted to be that source of warmth for others.

The memory of the past gradually mingled with the present. I turned to Frost, still absorbed in measuring flour with an adorable concentration. Though I wasn't quite ready to share all the painful memories of how I'd ended up on the streets, I wanted to at least share this portion of myself in hopes of deepening the growing relationship between us.

He looked up as I softly called his name, his icy blue eyes meeting mine, a flicker of curiosity in their depths. "Where did you get these ingredients?"

A faint flush crept up his neck, and he looked momentarily flustered. "I...might have snuck into a shop that I saw in your memories. I waited until after closing and I borrowed the ingredients, but I left more than enough coins that I'd found to cover it. I returned the recipe book before dawn after copying the page with instructions for gingerbread."

I blinked in disbelief, then a laugh bubbled up before I could stop it. "You snuck into a shop just to get these?"

He shrugged, a sheepish smile tugging at his lips. "I wanted them to be just right."

My heart swelled at the thought, urging me to open up to him and share why this shop held a prominent place in the memories he'd seen. I showed him the faded stamp on the sack. "This came from a bakery I used to visit." Emotion caught in my throat as the memory tugged at my heart.

Frost's gaze flickered to the sack, then back to me, his expression thoughtful. "What happened there?" His tone was gentle, as if he sensed there was more to the story.

I took a deep breath, letting the warmth of the memory wash over me. "It was during my first harsh winter on the streets. I had nothing—no money, no shelter—and I was starving. I stared at the bread through the bakery window, knowing I couldn't afford even a crumb, and certain that no one would spare me a coin to buy anything.

The baker saw me standing outside her shop, and instead of turning me away, she gave me a bag of leftover bread. I've often wondered what I did to deserve such kindness, especially when I'd been so blind to the beggars who used to come to me back when I still had something to give, before..." Emotion clogged my throat and I couldn't finish.

Rather than condemning me for the mistakes of my past self, Frost's eyes simply softened as he listened, his usual cool demeanor melting into something more human, a quiet empathy that gave me the strength to continue.

"The bread was still warm," I added, my voice thick with nostalgia. "But it wasn't just the food that warmed me—it was her kindness. She didn't have to help me, but she did, a small act of generosity that has stayed with me all this time."

Frost stepped closer, his presence steady and comforting, his gaze thoughtful as it lingered on the bag. "I don't need to view your memories to understand how much that kindness meant to you."

I nodded, my throat tightening as I traced the stamp one last time before meeting his gaze. "It was one of the few moments in my life when someone truly saw me—not as a burden or inconvenience, but as a person worth helping. I'd forgotten what that felt like, but standing here with you...it's all coming back. I want to be like that baker—someone who offers warmth and comfort to others, even in the smallest ways...even if my life is nearing its end." No matter how short my remaining time, I wanted to fill it with as much joy as possible so that unlike my past, I could depart without any lingering regrets.

Frost's fingers brushed against mine as he took the sack from me. "You already are that person, Blanche. You've brought warmth into my life, into this castle, in ways I never thought possible."

His words, so tender and sincere, caused peace to settle over me, pushing away the cold that had once lingered in my soul. I smiled, though the ache brought by the reminder of my fleeting time tightened my chest. "I want to do more. I want to always remember there's good in this world and try to be part of it." My longing was so acute that for a moment I struggled to breathe...especially when I remembered how little time I had left to make that difference.

Frost looked at me with a mix of admiration and affection, his hand lingering on mine, his touch grounding me. "You've already made a difference in my life. Whatever you choose to do, I know it will be filled with the same light you carry within you." He hesitated, as if unsure of whether to continue. "When we watched your memories together, admittedly I was...surprised by some of your actions."

Shame flooded my face, but Frost gently tilted my chin up, gazing at me with no hint of condemnation.

"The more I thought about it, the more I realized that you were acting as you'd been taught. You'd never witnessed love, so how could you be expected to show it?"

I shook my head, the voices of hungry children ringing in my ears. "That doesn't excuse ignoring a clear plea for help."

Frost nodded thoughtfully. "You're right, but I have seen your deep regret and your attempt to change and grow from your past mistakes. The past cannot be undone, but that doesn't mean the future must follow the same path. I know you are not the same person now that you were then."

His words touched something deep inside me, awakening a new resolve. I wanted to be someone who could offer warmth and comfort to others, even in the smallest of ways. Now with Frost by my side, surrounded by the ingredients he had so carefully gathered for me, I felt like I had the strength to carry that kindness forward for however long I had left.

I didn't want to dwell on the reality that only a handful of moments remained for me to live out my new purpose before Frost finally fulfilled his duty in acquiring my soul; I wanted to spend my remaining time not just living and serving to the best of my ability, but enjoying life with the man who was becoming increasingly dear to me.

I pushed away the last wisps of melancholy and nostalgia that clung to the edges of my mind and focused on the present—the warmth of this moment with him. It was easy for our current tenderness to turn into laughter when Frost lugged a hefty bag of baking powder onto the counter. "You certainly went above and beyond."

Puzzlement furrowed his brow, a perplexity that deepened further when I pointed to the recipe, explaining that we only needed a tiny spoonful. “Is that truly all that we need for an entire batch of gingerbread?” At my nod, his mystified expression cleared into one of his soft smiles, reminiscent of the tenderness blooming between us.

We continued working on the gingerbread, our shared laughter mingling with the warmth of the fire. The simple act of baking had become something more—a connection between us that allowed me to momentarily forget the weight of my looming future.

I watched as Frost carefully measured out the ingredients, his movements precise and deliberate, his brow furrowed in such concentration I couldn’t help but smile. I gently nudged him with my elbow. “You’re really taking this seriously.”

His lips curved into a small, almost sheepish grin as he looked up at me. “It’s important I get it right.”

There was something in his words—unspoken yet heavy with meaning—that sent my heart fluttering. He was expending so much effort for *me*, a thought that made this moment all the more precious.

When it came time to mix the spices, I noticed something that made me pause. Fighting to suppress my grin, I picked up one of the jars and turned it towards him. “Did you forget to label these?”

Frost blinked, his gaze flickering between the jar in my hand and the others lined up on the counter, each bearing a small amount of powder in various hues of brown. His expression slowly shifted from confusion to mild embarrassment. “I... didn’t consider that.”

A laugh bubbled from my chest as I shook my head, amused. “It appears we have quite the task ahead of us.”

We spent the next few minutes tasting and smelling a pinch from each jar, trying to distinguish the ginger from the cinnamon, the nutmeg from the cloves. With my limited baking experience the task proved harder than I expected, especially with Frost’s serious approach to every sniff and taste.

We initially got some of them wrong—mistaking nutmeg for cloves, causing us to almost use too much of the wrong spice. Each misstep brought another round of laughter, filling the frosty room with a lightness that drew my heart even closer to his, the space between us shrinking with every touch and glance.

I found Frost’s concentration endearing, especially the more his usual stoic demeanor and rigid posture relaxed as he allowed himself to enjoy the process. He closed his eyes as he took in each scent, a slight crease in his brow as he tried to place it. After lingering long over one particular jar, he triumphantly held it up, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“I’m quite confident this is the cinnamon.” Despite his showy declaration, a glimmer of doubt filled his tone.

I took a deep whiff, only to burst into laughter. “This is ginger! But you were close.”

He chuckled, shaking his head as he set the jar back down. “This is more complicated than I thought.”

“For all your mastery over winter, spices seem to be your weakness.”

“And this entire time I mistook it for the sun.” His eyes crinkled at the edges in a way that made my heart skip as he laughed again, a warm sound that filled the air between us. “In all my centuries, I’ve never attempted to venture beyond my sphere of winter magic; I never realized how much of life I’ve missed.”



My teasing smile softened into something gentler. "I'm glad we're experiencing this first together."

His eyes locked onto mine, his laughter fading into a look of tenderness. "So am I."

We fell into a comfortable silence, our hands occasionally brushing as we worked side by side. Each touch, each shared glance, was filled with a growing intimacy that knitted our hearts together in ways I could never have anticipated.

The soft scents of ginger and chocolate permeated the air, mingling with the crisp, cool essence of winter that clung to Frost, creating a heady combination that made my pulse quicken. His steady presence was both anchoring and exhilarating, and the simple act of creating something together sent a thrill through me I couldn't ignore.

As we finished mixing the spices and began shaping the dough, Frost suddenly reached out, his fingers brushing a streak of flour from my cheek. His gentle touch lingered as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. The tenderness in his gesture, so unlike the aloof figure I'd first met, made my heart skip a beat.

And yet, I hesitated to fully embrace it. I knew I was vulnerable to any kindness Frost showed me since my past, filled with loneliness and neglect, had left me starved for affection. Though I welcomed the growing closeness between us, I reminded myself to guard my heart, especially in a relationship that could have no future.

I needed to ensure I wasn't falling for the first person to care about me simply because he filled the aching void I hadn't realized the depth of until I'd met him. But with each accidental touch and every shared laugh, the pull I felt towards him was becoming harder to resist.

With the gingerbread finally baked and our mint hot cocoa steaming in our cups, we settled by the fire, our shoulders grazing as we relaxed in front of the hearth. Shiver joined us, curling into a cool ball in my lap.

I held my breath in anticipation as Frost took his first sip. His eyes widened slightly, his reaction to the warmth and sweetness one of pleasant surprise. I watched him with a soft smile, feeling the bond between us deepen despite my earlier resolve. His lips curved into a smile as he met my gaze, and the surge of affection that rushed through me was so strong it almost stole my breath.

"This is...different." His voice was softer than usual, almost reverent.

"In a good way, I hope?" I teased.

Frost nodded, his gaze fixed on the flames. "Yes, in a good way." He curled both hands around the cup as he inhaled the sweet steam.

Joy bloomed in my chest as I took a sip from my own cup. The minty warmth was just as I remembered—comforting and familiar. We broke off pieces of gingerbread, savoring the sweet, spicy flavor as it danced on our tongues, more delicious than any I'd ever tasted. It wasn't just the food that made the moment special, but the fact that we had made it together sweetened it more than the sugar we'd added. Each bite served as a reminder of the connection we were forging, a bond that strengthened with each passing day despite my concern for the future.

I couldn't help but smile as I watched him, a deep sense of contentment settling over me. For a brief moment, the worries and uncertainties of my limited time faded, replaced by the simple joy of sharing this experience. For this moment, I was alive...and more importantly, I was with *him*.

The quiet, irresistible pull beckoning me towards Frost grew stronger with each passing moment in his presence, and I found myself scooting closer and leaning my head against his shoulder. He stiffened at first, startled, but quickly relaxed, his arm

slipping around me to hold me close.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He didn’t respond with words, but his free hand found mine, his fingers lacing through mine in a gesture that conveyed more than words ever could. Surrounded by the warmth of the hearth and the sweetness of gingerbread, I knew that whatever the future held, we would face it together...and for now, that was enough.

## CHAPTER 14



I wanted to lose myself in the rest of my remaining time with Frost—basking in the stillness and contentment I had only ever dreamed of, now discovered in the final moments of my life. I yearned to further explore the hidden feelings growing inside me with every fluttering beat of my heart, emotions I could only fully explore in his company.

Frost stirred beside me on the hearth, as if ready to pull away. Though I knew the demands of his duties tending to winter and grappling with his faltering powers vied for his attention, I instinctively tightened my grip on his hand, a silent plea for him to remain in this reverent companionship a while longer.

To my relief, instead of releasing his hold on me, he leaned closer, his cool breath tickling my ear as his lips grazed my skin. “There’s something I want to show you.”

A rush of joy filled my chest at the realization he also wanted to prolong our time together, igniting hope that he cherished my company as much as I valued his.

Curiosity piqued, I let him pull me to my feet and followed him through the castle’s winding icy halls, followed by the glassy clink of ice claws as my fox companion Shiver trailed us, seeming reluctant as always to let me out of his sight. The air grew colder with each step, the walls shimmering with a soft, ethereal glow. The deeper we ventured into his realm, the more my anticipation built.

“Where are we going?” My breath was visible in the surrounding chill when I voiced the question I was unable to contain any longer.

A small, secretive smile played on his lips as his fingers curled around mine more tightly. “You’ll see.”

We reached a grand set of doors, intricately carved with swirling patterns that seemed to shift and come alive under the glow of the ice. With a gentle push, Frost opened them, revealing what lay beyond.

My breath caught in my throat as I stepped into the most stunning garden I had ever seen—a breathtaking representation of spring, carved entirely from ice. Delicate flowers bloomed in every corner, their intricate petals etched with designs so fine, they appeared real. Soft, ethereal light shone from their centers, casting cool hues of winter across the snowy landscape. Icy vines curled along the ground, their tendrils glistening in the soft glow. Crystal-clear streams wound alongside the paths, their surfaces reflecting the beauty around them. It was a dreamlike scene—an enchanting, frozen echo of life in full bloom.

“It’s beautiful.” My voice was barely audible as I marveled at the sight.

“This is my most cherished creation,” Frost murmured, his gaze sweeping across the garden with a mix of pride and something more tender. “The one place in my realm where winter never fully takes hold.”

I moved closer to one of the ice flowers, reaching out to touch it. It was cold, yet somehow not harsh, just like everything in this hidden sanctuary. "It's as if you've captured the essence of spring."

Frost's gaze met mine, filled with a hint of unspoken vulnerability he rarely revealed. "Perhaps part of me has always longed to experience spring in some form. That's why I wanted to share this place with you, the one who taught me that even in the coldest places, there's beauty to be found."

My heart swelled. "It's a sentiment I share. Until I met you, I never knew winter could be so magical."

A faint blush colored his cheeks, but his smile was tender. As if to deepen the wonder of the moment, he extended his hand. With a graceful flick of his wrist, delicate ice butterflies formed in the air and began to flit around the garden. They sparkled like jewels, their translucent wings catching the light in a way that made them seem almost alive.

I extended a hand in wonder towards the fragile creatures; to my surprise one lit on my fingertip, opening and closing its impossibly thin, transparent wings. The light shone through it, casting violet and teal shadows over my hand. I was afraid to lean in for a closer look lest my breath melt it, so I stood transfixed until it finally fluttered away.

I looked up at Frost, a little puzzled. "How were you able to do that? With all of the recent changes, it's astounding that this place remains untouched and you were able to so effortlessly create these stunning butterflies."

Frost thoughtfully gazed down at his hands, flexing his fingers. "I'm not sure. Perhaps it's because this place is so meaningful to me. I've found joy and purpose in maintaining all of winter that is my domain over the millennia, but this garden was created so I could simply delight in its beauty, to appreciate something that wasn't solely about the season. I don't know how much longer this will last if my magic continues to falter, but I wanted to share it with you while I still could."

I reached out to stroke a delicate cherry blossom adorning an icy branch. "I'm glad. Even if it melts, that's how spring is—something lovely we experience for a little while in person, and after that only in memory. The beauty of spring is its impermanence, a reminder that nothing lasts forever...but that doesn't make it any less precious." Just like the tender feelings budding inside my heart towards him, meaningful for however long we had remaining.

Frost took a step towards me until we stood inches apart, his brilliant blue eyes intent. My breath caught as his hand slowly lifted, his thumb softly tracing my cheek. "Blanche." The tenderness filling his husky voice made my heart ache.

Before I could respond, a sharp bark startled us. I stumbled backward in surprise, nearly slipping on the icy path. I turned my head to see Shiver joyfully leaping after the crystalline butterflies, his playful spirit uncontainable. His tail wagged as he skidded across the ice, barking in delight as he tried to catch the elusive creatures.

A new sound blended with my pet's playful exuberance as my laughter spilled out, echoing in the stillness of the garden as I released the tension and longing of the previous moments, filling the space with a warmth that felt almost out of place amid the ice but which had become part of the unexpected friendship Frost and I had forged. The joy of the moment was contagious, making me feel closer to him than I ever had before, as if the unseen magic of this frozen garden had drawn us even closer, making the bond between us all the more tangible.

I turned away from Shiver to find Frost staring at me with a look of wonder. "I've never heard you laugh so freely until today," he murmured. "I don't think I've

ever heard a more beautiful sound.”

My cheeks warmed at the compliment, even as I considered his words. “My life for the past year or so has been devoid of laughter. Even before I found myself on the streets, I can’t remember the last time I truly laughed as opposed to my pretended, genteel amusement as I interacted with the peerage and sought to appear attractive.” I lowered my eyes, ashamed.

“It’s one of my greatest privileges that you’re comfortable and happy enough with me to share true laughter.” Frost took my hand and squeezed softly, leading me deeper into the world of icy spring.

My breath caught at every new marvel I discovered, unable to tear my eyes away—a delicate flower here, a shimmering butterfly there, each a new wonder for my enjoyment. “It’s truly breathtaking, Frost,” I murmured. “I never imagined something so alive could exist in a place like this.”

Frost watched me with a soft smile, his gaze following mine as I took in the surrounding beauty and wonder. “I’m glad that this garden is the one place that has remained untouched by the thaw tainting the rest of my realm, a piece of spring frozen in time.”

I gently caressed the smooth surface of a thin, icy petal between my fingers. “Spring was always my favorite season—a time of new beginnings and hope after the cold winter. I used to spend hours in the garden at home, waiting for the first flowers to bloom. Even after I ended up on the streets, those first signs of life gave me something to hold on to when things were hard.”

Frost’s expression grew thoughtful as he extended a finger for one of his butterflies to perch. “It saddens me that my season caused you so much pain.” He paused, watching the butterfly’s wings glisten in the pale light. “I created this sanctuary at the beginning of time, long before meeting you caused me to long for something beyond the winter that had been my only companion and refuge. Perhaps I’ve always envied spring—the warmth, the vibrancy, the life, everything that my world isn’t. I’ve tried to capture that here, though it’s merely a shadow of the real thing.”

A hint of melancholy darkened his expression as his gaze drifted, as though he was lost looking back at the eternity that had led him here.

I stepped closer. “You’ve created something truly special, Frost. But it must be lonely, surrounded by so much beauty that never changes or really grows, merely reflecting all the unspoken hopes your heart longs for.”

I hadn’t yet spoken about the isolation I’d witnessed in the mirror that revealed his past; I wanted him to open up to me and allow me to help him—not just out of appreciation for all the times he’d listened to me, but so he wouldn’t have to continue carrying his burden alone.

A shadow crossed his face as the butterfly took flight and he turned his attention to me. “Loneliness has always been a part of my life; it’s the price of being the Keeper of Winter.” His voice was low, filled with years of weariness. “But since meeting you, something’s changed—you’ve brought warmth into my world in a way I never imagined possible. Even though I’ve existed for centuries, it wasn’t until I met you that I realized I’ve never truly lived. I want to be with you, to share the warmth you’ve given me. But I fear that in doing so, I’ll lose everything that I am.”

The uncertainty filling his deep blue eyes at the possibility extended across the space separating us to touch my heart, allowing me to feel all of his fears with him. I didn’t want him to lose anything because he’d met me. Life had taught me that even if I lost everything I thought mattered, there was always the opportunity to

gain something new one might not otherwise discover if they'd gone down a different path.

After all, I'd only met Frost because I'd frozen to death. Perhaps my suffering—not only that cold night in the alley but my entire time on the streets—had not been merely cruel happenstance, but had been intended to lead to this.

I moved closer, resting a gentle hand on his arm. “And what if it means gaining something even more? Your existence has remained stagnant for so long, but life is about change. Maybe it's time for you to experience something new. You don't have to be alone anymore.”

He didn't respond immediately, his attention drawn to my hand resting on his arm as though my touch anchored him. Slowly, his hand found mine, covering my fingers in a tight grip.

Before we could continue our budding relationship, I knew I needed to tell Frost about the event my showcase of memories from before had stopped just short of. He had opened himself to me and deserved the same honesty.

Noticing an ornate bench of ice beneath one of the blossoming trees, I sat down. Frost joined me, facing me curiously. My fingers trembled slightly as I slowly withdrew the silver door knocker from my pocket. His eyes widened, but he patiently waited for me to speak.

I stroked the glossy surface, untarnished thanks to how often I handled it. “One evening my parents hosted a lavish ball.” I closed my eyes, reliving the moment—the swirling satin gowns, the hundreds of lit candles, the tables piled high with all manner of elegant treats. “Towards the end of the night, a young man who had been showing me particular attention for the past several months led me into a secluded alcove and proposed to me. I harshly rejected him; he wasn't wealthy enough for my ambitions, nor handsome enough to catch my eye.”

Remorse curdled my stomach. I took a wavering breath and Frost reached out to cover my hand with his own, patiently waiting for me to continue.

“I went to bed in the early hours of the morning, tired from all the excitement and jaded—my plans for the future were to secure a match that would provide me with the money, reputation, and societal clout I longed for, but deep down I feared that even that wouldn't satisfy the empty ache I felt. I'd only slept a few hours when I was wakened by a loud banging. I went downstairs to find a stranger forcing the front door open. I tried to call for help, but the house was empty—my parents, the servants...everyone was gone. The man followed me into the kitchens, and though he assured me he wasn't going to hurt me, he informed me I needed to leave immediately because the home had been repossessed.”

Frost frowned in confusion. “Where had everyone gone?”

I sighed. “Unbeknownst to me, my father had been gambling for years, and in a desperate attempt to avoid financial ruin, he placed an incredibly risky bet with our home as collateral. He lost, and with it everything we owned and more. His final act of defiance was to throw an expensive party he could never pay for the day before the house was to be taken. After I went to bed, he attempted to leave town, but was detained by the police and later sentenced to debtor's prison.”

“Leaving you and your mother to fend for yourselves?” Frost's voice tightened with concern.

I bit my lip, shaking my head. “My mother, who knew she would soon be evicted, had been secretly selling off anything of value for weeks, though I didn't know this until later when I overheard gossip on the street. She raised enough money to buy passage on a ship to a neighboring kingdom where her sister lived, leaving in the night without a word to me.”

Frost's eyes widened in horror. "Your parents just abandoned you, leaving you in a home that was no longer yours?"

I managed a nod. "My father was desperate to escape prison and my mother was equally desperate to escape being dragged down with him. Though she would likely have avoided prison, surely she would have lost her status in society."

"But how could they leave their child behind?"

I shrugged. "They left me behind my entire life. My governess was the only one who made sure I was fed, clothed, and educated, and I thought she truly loved me." I took a wavering breath, the pain of this discovery even deeper than losing my parents, who had never shown any sign of affection. "But though she faithfully cared for me, I was nothing more than a job for her, and once payment ceased, so did her efforts."

A movement caught my eye and I glanced up to see Frost's eyes blazing, tiny snowflakes swirling about him in his agitation. "No one should ever have to experience what you did."

I squeezed his fingers in gratitude for the empathy I had been seeking from the moment my life had drastically altered.

"The new owner allowed me to dress in my simplest gown, but refused to let me to take anything with me as it all belonged to him...not that there was much of value left anyway. I protested but he shoved me out; I tripped over this door knocker on my way down the steps. In his banging on the door and receiving no answer since all the servants had left, he'd managed to wrench the top part free and had thrown it down. I took it with me, not because a broken piece of metal had value, but because it was the one link to my former life. I used to look into it like a mirror, noting how my appearance changed as my face gradually grew thinner and my hair became dirty and matted. Some days I almost thought I'd dreamed my former life of prosperity and would touch this to remind myself that it had been real, that I used to matter...or at least I thought I did."

"Did everyone in your life abandon you?" Frost asked, his voice hushed.

"My so-called friends, who were simply the children of my parents' peers, never had actual regard for me...nor did I for them. We built friendships based on what we could get from each other. There was one family I knew distantly that was not really wealthy enough for our circles but who carried the weight of an old and honored name. The day I was cast out, I passed by their home while stumbling down the street, not knowing where I was going. I heard my name and looked up to see the lady of the house hurrying after me. Though she didn't have money to spare, she told me she could offer employment as a maid, with a small room to sleep in and regular meals instead of a paycheck."

"Then why were you living on the streets?" Frost demanded. "Did she renege on the offer?"

I lowered my eyes. "My pride as a gentleman's daughter caused me to angrily refuse, considering such a position beneath me regardless of the fact that I had nothing. Of course I deeply regretted it later, but even if I'd been willing to humble myself to ask for another chance, the family moved shortly after."

"So what did you do?" Frost leaned closer, his breaths coming quickly as he listened intently.

"I survived, somehow. I learned to sell little bouquets of flowers during the warm months and matches during the winter. Though I was far from successful, I managed to stay alive for over a year. My pride crumbled as I begged my old friends to buy my wares, yet I possessed no true humility, only festering anger that grew every time I saw someone riding in a fine carriage or strolling along in furs

and jewels, reminding me that the only reason I was not in their place was a cruel trick of fate.”

I paused at the memory of my constant resentment, recalling how it had swept through me as I watched my former peers living carefree, spendthrift lifestyles while I was punished in the harshest of ways. While the anger hadn’t filled my belly, I’d clung to it because beneath it lurked the despair I was afraid would overcome me in its place; focusing on how I’d been wronged kept me from sinking into absolute hopelessness.

“I couldn’t bring myself to consider that perhaps I fully deserved my situation. I’d done nothing worthwhile in my life or showed kindness to anyone.” I paused, fighting to hold back the sobs tightening my throat.

Frost enfolded me, wrapping both arms tightly around me in a comforting embrace. “No one deserves to grow up in a loveless home without a single person who cares for them, to be cast out of the only life they know with no warning and no way to sustain themselves, nor should anyone live their entire life without ever experiencing what it is like to love and be loved.”

“Until now. You have shown me what it is like to have someone truly care for me...and to care for him in return.” I drew back and lifted the door knocker to gaze into its mirrored surface. “Every time I have looked into this, I have compared my reflection to who I was. Now I understand that who I was is not a person to admire or who I want to be. I know how little I deserve any form of love, but if I had the chance to try again, I’d like to become someone who saw others rather than simply her own ambition.”

Frost gently took the door knocker and gripped both my hands in his. “You were given the worst possible chance at life, and yet you have decided to care about others rather than spending your days fighting fate. You are absolutely worthy of love.” He looked like he wanted to say more before his expression smoothed and he continued. “No matter what you’ve done, you deserve to be deeply loved. It’s been my greatest gift to come to know you and discover your beautiful heart.” He pulled me close, tucking the edge of his cloak around me.

Night began to settle around us, casting the ice garden in a new kind of beauty bathed in the cool light of dusk. Frost eventually released me and reached into his cloak, pulling out a tiny ice flute, its surface shimmering like starlight in the darkening sky. He lifted it to his lips and began to play.

The haunting melody was soft, carried on the wind like a secret. Part of my mind registered that the music was attuned to a frequency beyond my hearing. I could somehow feel the gentle, whispered song of the snowflakes responding to each note, as if my soul, now entwined with this wintry realm, could understand the language of the elements themselves.

A sudden shimmer lit the sky and I looked up with a gasp to see a ray of brilliant green, seemingly called to life by the flute. Frost’s music wove through the aurora like a thread, binding the moment in enchantment. In rhythm with the melody, the sky above us shifted as more swaths of color joined the first to dance across the dark canvas—vibrant and alive, the aurora spread across the heavens, its colors shimmering in a mesmerizing display that reflected off the ice, casting an ethereal glow over the frosty garden. The enchanted sight stole my breath, a magical interplay of light and shadow that made winter’s beauty feel almost otherworldly.

Long after the final note faded we remained side by side, our shoulders brushing as we watched the aurora’s light continue to dance across the ice, casting everything in a soft, ethereal glow. The beauty of it left me breathless, but it was the quiet



connection between us that made the moment unforgettable. Without thinking, my hand found his again, our fingers intertwining naturally, as if they had always belonged together.

Once again, I found myself immersed in a moment I wished could last forever. I had never thought much about the future—whether it had been during my life of privilege when my path seemed predetermined, or on the streets where every day was a constant fight for survival. But ever since meeting Frost, I had begun to hope in the possibility of something more.

I glanced at him standing beside me, his head tilted back to watch the aurora dancing above us, the colors reflected in his eyes. “Have you ever thought about what might exist beyond your role as the Keeper of Winter, or are there any dreams or wishes you’ve imagined for yourself?”

He blinked, clearly taken aback by the question. “I’ve never thought about it.” Deep in thought, his gaze shifted to the light caressing the patch of ice blossoms growing alongside the path. “I’ve lived for so long with only a single purpose—to maintain the balance of the seasons to keep the world in order. It’s all I’ve ever known; I’ve never allowed myself to think beyond that.”

“What about now? If you could wish for anything without the weight of your duties holding you back, what would it be?” I already knew what I most longed for if the tomorrow that might never come was more certain—the very thing I had now held in my hand. My grip lacing through his tightened.

Vulnerability flickered in his eyes, as if my question had stirred something deep within him. When he finally spoke, his words emerged quietly, almost uncertain. “I wish...I could know what it feels like to truly live. To experience warmth, not just as a fleeting sensation but as something constant. To laugh, to love, to share my life with someone who sees me for more than what I can do with my magic. I wish for a life where I’m not defined by the cold, where I can be something *more*.”

His words tugged at my heart. I squeezed his hand gently in reassurance. “Unlike me, you have forever stretching ahead of you.”

His gaze sought mine, full of a longing too deep for words. “I would give anything to transfer to you a portion of my time in order to share the remainder of my existence with you. What about you, what is your wish?”

I didn’t even need to ponder his earnest question. “I’ve spent so much time running from my past and regrets that I never considered about who I wanted to be. But now standing here with you, there’s no doubt that the future I want is one where I’m not just surviving. Without my noticing, my greatest desire shifted from finding a way to reverse the destined death fate has awaiting me...to simply being with you.”

“You are all I want too and more,” he murmured, his voice filled with quiet intensity. “I want to build a life with you, to experience the world through your eyes and discover the beauty in the seasons beyond winter. I want to be not only the Keeper of Winter, but the keeper of your heart—I want to live, with you by my side.”

Tears pricked my eyes as I smiled, a mixture of joy and longing. “Is such a future possible with your claim on my soul?”

He lifted his hand, gently brushing away a tear I hadn’t realized had fallen, his cool touch tender and soothing. “Whatever the future holds, I’ll find a way, no matter what it takes. You deserve to not only live, but to do so with joy.”

Leaning into his touch, I let hope and determination fill my heart. “You deserve that as well. I will be happy as long as we’re together.”

He leaned in so close our foreheads nearly touched, his voice a whisper of resolve. "Together, Blanche."

The warmth of our connection enveloped us as he pulled me into his arms. We stood there beneath the sky's dance of fuchsia and teal, its light reflecting our shared hopes and dreams in the vibrant colors above. The aurora's glow softened the usual stoicism on his face, revealing the man beneath the title of Keeper of Winter. The beauty of the intimate moment and the promise of a future we both desired filled the spaces between us, as though everything we had shared since meeting had been leading to this moment.

As the unspoken emotions swirled in the air, time seemed to slow, the space around us narrowing until the world outside ceased to exist. The aurora's shimmering cast a soft glow across his dear face, illuminating the vulnerability and longing in his eyes—a reflection of my own unspoken feelings. We stood so close that I could feel the faint chill of his breath mingling with the warmth of mine, creating a delicate balance just like the one we shared.

Without conscious thought we leaned closer, as if drawn by an invisible force, our hearts pounding in unison of quiet anticipation. When our lips finally met, it was like two worlds colliding—his cool touch against my warmth, a tender melding of contrasts that somehow fit perfectly. The kiss was soft at first, hesitant, as if we were both savoring the newfound intimacy, the quiet realization that we had crossed a threshold from which there was no return.

Gradually, the kiss deepened, filled with the harbored emotions we had both been holding back. There was sweetness in it, a promise of the life we both longed for—a future where we could be vulnerable, strong, and free together.

Frost's hand gently cupped my cheek, his thumb brushing against my skin with such tenderness that it made my heart ache. My fingers threaded through his hair, the strands cool beneath my touch that contrasted with the tender warmth spreading through me.

The world around us seemed to fade into a blur, leaving only the two of us. The distant sounds of the ice garden—the soft tinkling of frozen streams, the gentle fluttering of ice butterflies—became a quiet symphony that played just for us. The aurora above danced in rhythm with our heartbeat, casting a kaleidoscope of colors across the ice, wrapping us in a cocoon of light and shadow. No matter what the future held, this moment would stay with me forever.

When we finally pulled away, breathless and dazed, I kept my forehead resting against his, our eyes still closed as we lingered in the afterglow of the kiss. Neither of us spoke, as if words would shatter the fragile spell that had woven itself around us.

We remained intertwined, hearts open and exposed, sharing a moment that would forever be etched in the very essence of who we were becoming together. As if to symbolize what had happened, I looked down at our clasped hands to see a tendril of frost encircling our hold, a springlike vine that wound around the two of us, as if to bind us together.

In that quiet aftermath as the aurora's dancing light slowly faded into the night, I knew that our kiss had been more than just a culmination of our bond—it was a quiet vow, the promise of a new beginning, and the first step towards a future we both secretly hoped for where we could be free to live and love...not as the Keeper of Winter and a wandering soul, but simply as Frost and Blanche.

## CHAPTER 15



### *Frost*

I paced back and forth in the dim light of my icy sanctuary, the walls shimmering with an otherworldly glow as if they were attuned to my inner turmoil. I couldn't escape my racing thoughts, desperately seeking the elusive solution that would save the mortal woman who, despite all my denials, was becoming alarmingly dear to me.

I had tried every possible avenue—scouring ancient texts, whispering to the winds, and even consulting the spirits of the frozen north—but no answer had revealed itself. The weight of my urgency grew heavier with each passing moment as time slipped away in the hourglass that measured Blanche's life. The few grains that remained seemed to have been frozen in time while she dwelt in my realm, but I constantly feared that now that her soul was free for my capture, it would progress again, causing her fleeting life to slip away.

While she slept, I frantically searched for a way to save her, my mind consumed by the fear of losing her. Long into each night I worked until I inevitably fell asleep over my books, a sign of my growing weakness. Yet during her waking hours I spent every spare moment I could with her. Each conversation, shared silence, and simple interaction took on a new depth, as if the world had shifted. Her smile felt like first thaw of spring, melting away the frost that had encased my heart for so long.

Somehow, the short duration of our time together—nothing more than a fleeting drop in my endless existence—had become the most cherished I'd ever known. I allowed myself to bask in her presence, the cold of my realm forgotten in the face of her happiness. The sight of her in this place that had been mine alone for so long stirred something deep within me—a mix of emotions I couldn't fully comprehend.

No moment surpassed that of our first kiss. The moment our lips met, something within me shifted—a warmth spread through my chest, melting away the last remnants of the ice that had once encased my heart. The fact that she'd just shared her most painful, shameful memory with me—baring her battered heart to my view—made it even sweeter.

Though our kiss shouldn't have happened, I found myself returning to the memory often, reliving it like a treasured melody, each note sweet and resonant—the softness of her lips against mine, the way her breath had mingled with the cold air, creating a delicate mist between us, almost as if our worlds were intertwining.

Every day after that felt like a gift, each more precious than the last. We continued to explore my realm together, but now a deeper connection existed between us, an unspoken understanding that we were no longer just two individuals

bound by circumstance but something more. Our conversations grew more intimate, our silences more comfortable, and the small touches we shared carried a weight of meaning that I had never known before.

We spent hours in one another's company, sometimes wandering through the icy corridors of my castle, other times venturing out into the snowy landscape. Blanche told me stories from her life, sharing memories that were as colorful and varied as the seasons themselves, and I listened, captivated by the vibrancy of her experiences. In return, I found myself revealing parts of my own history, fragments of my long existence that I had never shared with another. It was as if, in opening myself up to her, I was rediscovering parts of myself that had long been buried beneath layers of ice.

I began to notice the little things that had once eluded me: the way her eyes lit up when she saw Shiver running to meet her or when she saw a new ice creation I'd designed, the way she'd tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear, or the way she seemed to bring light and warmth into the coldest corners of my realm.

And yet, beneath the surface, I couldn't shake the lingering knowledge that our time together was finite, the forces threatening to tear us apart growing stronger with each passing day. Her life was but a brief flicker in the endless expanse of my existence, a single snowflake in my eternal blizzard. Yet that flicker had become the brightest light I'd ever known, casting long shadows over the cold, unfeeling void that had once been my only companion.

Previously, I'd never given a thought to my immortal existence, but now I looked forward with something akin to dread to all of the years that would stretch out before me after she was gone. I imagined myself wandering through the empty halls of my castle, Blanche's absence a gaping wound that would never heal.

I tried to tell myself it would be easier to let go before the roots of my feelings burrowed any further into the frozen ground of my heart. She was a fragile mortal, destined to wither and fade like the seasons, while I would remain unchanging, watching as time passed me by...once more endured alone.

No matter how diligently I tried to build walls of ice back around my heart, she had already found her way in, melting the frost that had encased my soul for centuries. She had touched a part of me that had been dormant for so long that I had forgotten it even existed, breathing life into the cold, lifeless world I'd created for myself; the thought of returning to that solitude was unbearable.

I attempted to distract myself with maintaining my realm, attempting to will the ice and snow to obey my commands as they always had. But every time I tried to retreat into the icy solitude that had been my sanctuary for centuries, I found myself drawn back to her—seeking a single glimpse of her smile, or to hear the sound of her laughter echoing through the halls of my castle—causing the resolve I had so carefully constructed to crumble.

With each passing day—each shared laugh and stolen kiss—I found it harder and harder to imagine a life without her, a life that would stretch on into eternity, cold and empty once more. So I allowed myself to hold onto the warmth she had brought into my existence, and to hope, however fleetingly, that there might be a way to make this winter last forever.

Now as I bent over a book I'd already scoured multiple times, she sat quietly in the far corner of the room, concern etching her features despite her life being the one at risk...and my horrible duty to be the one to end it. Whatever amount of time her soul might extend in my endless immortality would be meaningless without her in it, living, breathing, and sharing my existence.

My usually dormant heart wrenched at the thought, reminding me of the perplexing emotions that distracted me from my purpose as the King of Winter, especially now that I knew that I was able to...I sighed and shook my head.

Somehow, in the short duration of our acquaintanceship, she'd become my one constant in this cold world—more so than the powers I'd always relied on. The warmth she had brought into my life had pierced through my icy exterior, yet every moment spent with her felt like sand slipping through an hourglass—precious and fleeting.

"There has to be a way," I muttered, my voice barely a whisper against the cold air. "Some loophole, some hidden path that I haven't yet discovered..."

Blanche rose and crossed the room to stand beside me, her presence enfolding me in a comforting warmth that I grew to crave the longer we spent together. "What's troubling you?" Her voice pulled me back from the edge of my spiraling thoughts.

I hesitated, but concealing the truth was both dishonest and pointless. "I've searched every corner of the winter realm, consulted every spirit, read every ancient text...but nothing gives me hope of saving you without disrupting the balance. I'm bound by the unyielding laws that govern my existence, forces far greater than myself...though there is one who might know a way." I took a wavering breath before speaking the name I both feared and respected. "Borealis."

Her brow puckered, a seemingly simple gesture but one I found strangely endearing. The more I came to know her, the more intoxicating I found her. Objectively, she was no different from any other mortal, yet everything about her drew me in. Though her appearance hadn't changed save for her hair acquiring a shimmer reminiscent of frost, with each passing day she seemed more beautiful. Desires stirred within my frozen heart that diverged from my old single-minded purpose of creating winter.

"Who is Borealis?" she asked.

"The Spirit of Winter, a primordial, ancient being who embodies the true essence of winter itself, beyond what I as the season's king represent."

She furrowed her brow, my paltry explanation clearly not enough to satisfy her curiosity. "I don't understand. I thought you were the King of Winter. What is this being's role in relation to yours?"

I took a moment to gather my thoughts, knowing this would be difficult to explain. "Borealis is the original force of winter, a being that existed long before the current cycle of seasons. His power and wisdom dwarf even mine. He is neither benevolent nor malevolent, but exists on a plane where emotions and morality are irrelevant. His sole concern is maintaining the natural order, ensuring the cycle of life and death remains unbroken. Borealis represents the raw, unfiltered force of nature—a power that cannot be easily swayed or controlled, even by beings like me."

Her eyes widened, the weight of my words sinking in. "So he's the creator of the laws that govern your existence?"

I nodded. "Borealis is the one who defined the laws that bind me, thus he is the only one who could hope to overwrite them...and possibly change the fate I fear for you. But..." I trailed off, my mind already consumed by the dangers that awaited us. Though Borealis could be the key to breaking the cycle that bound me to my duty, dealing with him would be perilous. His motives were enigmatic, not to mention that the price for his intervention could be far higher than either of us anticipated.

She stepped closer, determination shining in her eyes. “Wherever you go, I will accompany you...especially if it’s for my sake.”

Protests immediately burned on my tongue. “Why would you take such a risk when you know where my duty still lies, and what I will be forced to do should the elements overcome you on our journey?”

She considered my words carefully. “I know it seems illogical when you’ve made no secret of what your ultimate destiny is, but not only have you rescued me more than once, I’ve enjoyed our time together. It’s the happiest I’ve ever been in my life, making it impossible to resent you. And you are the only one who has ever sought to protect me or to make me happy...making you the only one I trust.”

My heart swelled at her words, filled with a gratitude I didn’t deserve. I shook my head and stepped back from her, as if the mere suggestion was too much to bear. “No. It’s too dangerous. The path to Borealis is treacherous, even for someone like me. You...you could be hurt, or worse.” Mortals’ fragility that I’d never had any reason to give a second thought felt unbearable in this moment.

Fear briefly flickered in her eyes—the awareness of her own weakness that I often saw reflected in the faces of mortals, an emotion I would do anything to dispel...even if it meant venturing to face the one being whose authority superseded mine.

But whatever reservation I thought I glimpsed lasted only a moment before determination took its place. “I’ve already frozen to death once.”

The risk extended beyond her mortal life; her soul was at stake, and with my faltering powers growing weaker the longer she resided in my ice castle, I was less certain I would be able to protect her. The sense of helplessness—so foreign to me after an eternity of relying solely on my power—felt suffocating, especially as an even more alarming thought occurred to me.

“Borealis may judge that my indecision is unacceptable and that he must complete my duty himself.”

Her eyes widened in alarm as she pulled in a quick breath, but rather than falter in her decision, she only stepped closer to me. “Even so, I still choose to be with you through it all rather than wait here where he could possibly use his power as well.”

Sharp pain unlike any I’d ever experienced seized my heart at the thought of anything happening to her, such a contrast to my indifference when I’d first encountered her in that alley. Back then she’d been merely another soul to claim, but now the idea of losing her was excruciating.

She reached out to take my hand, a touch that caused my heart to give an erratic leap. “I’m not afraid, Frost. Not if it means helping you, helping *us*. I won’t just sit here, waiting and wondering if you’ll return. I want to be there with you, no matter the risks.”

Her cheeks pinked and she lowered her gaze. She seemed to realize she’d reached for me and hastily released me, but I seized her hand once more, unwilling to lose this precious contact. Though her skin was uncomfortably warm, I found that the longer I touched her, the more I craved it and the happiness that filled the void in my heart I hadn’t even realized was there until our meeting.

She stared at our laced hands for a moment before looking up at me, her large grey eyes filled with unspoken questions. I wished I had an explanation for the feelings coursing through me, dictating my actions beyond my understanding. All I knew was that I wanted to be near her, to protect her.

Yet that desire was eclipsed by the need to find a way to reverse the course she was on. I wanted to go back in time and undo every cold spell I’d ever woven, just so she would never know the pain of freezing. The thought that the magic I loved

had caused her suffering tainted the joy I'd once derived from it, leaving an ache deep inside me that I couldn't fully comprehend.

"I'm coming with you," she repeated firmly. "However long I have left, my life is mine to direct. I've always lived as though helpless—either as a useless member of the peerage or a vagabond barely surviving on the streets. It's time I choose my own future, as much as I am able to."

Her powerful statement left me with no choice but to relent. Yet my heart ached at her words, torn between my instinct to protect her and the growing realization that I needed her—more than I'd ever needed anyone.

Her grey eyes stared up at mine, wide and imploring, reaching deep inside me to unravel the resolve I had so carefully constructed. The part of me that had always been so certain and unyielding was now wavering in the face of the impossible. Yet even midst it, one undeniable truth remained.

"I can't lose you." My voice was raw with emotion. "If anything happened to you because of me..."

"You won't lose me," she said firmly, her grip on my hand tightening. "We've come this far together. Let me help you find the answer. You don't have to do this alone."

My breath caught in my throat as I looked into her eyes, seeing the determination and love that burned there. I had grown so accustomed to my lone existence, relying solely on myself and my powers for any conflict I encountered, that the concept of not facing it alone was almost unfathomable.

Blanche stepped close and slid her arms around my waist, laying her head on my chest for a long moment before lifting her face to search my gaze. My heart filled with the tenderest affection as well as an overwhelming gratefulness for this woman who was committed to staying by my side, such a comforting contrast to the cold isolation that defined most of my existence.

I gently bent my head to kiss her softly, this kiss filled not with the wonder of discovery like before but woven through with a mixture of promise and sorrow, as though we both acknowledged this was likely one of the last touches we'd share but were determined to be together as long as possible.

The thought of leaving her unprotected and vulnerable to danger filled me with a cold dread that far surpassed any fear I'd ever known. I needed her strength, her warmth, her very presence beside me. To do this alone would be to deny the bond we had forged, to ignore the truth that had been growing within me—I couldn't bear to be apart from her.

With a deep, resigned sigh, I nodded. "Alright, we'll go together. But you must stay close to me, no matter what. The path to Borealis is filled with dangers that even I cannot fully predict. Promise me that you'll trust me to protect you."

"I promise," she said, her voice steady and filled with resolve as she slid her warm fingers into mine.

I squeezed her hand, but suddenly, that minimal contact wasn't enough. I drew her into one last brief, fierce embrace. "Then we'll face whatever comes together," I murmured, my breath cool against her ear. "And we'll find a way to save you. We have to."

As we stepped out of the sanctuary, the air around us began to shift, the first stirrings of our journey to Borealis that would test everything we had come to mean to each other and perhaps finally reveal the answer we both sought. I gathered what remained of my magic and closed my eyes for a moment, envisioning our destination.

The wind howled in the distance, as if sensing the gravity of what was to come, but for the first time in my long, cold existence, I felt a flicker of hope—small and fragile, but there nonetheless...and it was all because of her.



## CHAPTER 16



I conjured a portal to take us most of the way, but once we entered Borealis's territory, we became subject to his powerful influence—a realm where my magic held no sway, forcing us to travel the remaining distance on foot. I kept my arm securely around Blanche as we proceeded, but the farther we ventured, the more my powers waned in this primordial place where the true essence of winter reigned supreme. Rather than feeling in my element surrounded by the ice and snow, I felt like a mortal attempting to infiltrate a magical fortress. But we pressed on through the relentless blizzard, desperate to find Borealis and seek his advice.

With every step, the chill choking the air seemed to change, subtly shifting as if it were responding to the warmth of Blanche's hand in mine. My heart, usually as cold and unyielding as ice, pulsed with an unfamiliar rhythm—a warmth that seemed to emanate from her and spread through me.

Her touch seemed to be altering my magic—whenever we brushed past the frost-covered surfaces around us, the ice patterns shifted into delicate shapes, reflecting her emotions rather than my intentions. The contrast between the warmth of her skin and the biting cold of the air grew more apparent with each passing moment.

As she exhaled, her breath formed soft clouds that lingered in the air longer than usual, slowly crystallizing into tiny, glittering flakes. Winter was intertwining with her being, not just in an abstract sense—her essence was merging with the frost I commanded, making it so I could no longer control every nuance of winter's embrace as I once did.

The wonder in her widening eyes shimmered like the light reflected from the icy walls. "It's like I can almost touch the cold, but it's not painful. Instead, it's almost...comforting."

Each time our fingers brushed, I felt a small portion of my winter powers transfer to her, leaving a faint, glimmering trail of frost in its wake. Our souls were merging, not just in the emotional sense—her very being was absorbing my magic, making her another vessel for winter's essence...which made it all the more imperative that we reach Borealis.

The chilly winds howled as we ventured deep into the heart of the ancient glacier where the Spirit of Winter was said to dwell. The frozen landscape stretched endlessly, a labyrinth of jagged ice and snow that seemed to swallow all light and sound. Above the sky was a swirling mass of dark clouds, a perpetual storm that blocked out the sun, leaving the world in an eternal twilight.

The frigid air grew denser until even I—who thrived in the cold—could feel it biting into my exposed skin, gnawing at the edges of my resolve. The ice cracked underfoot, and I tightened my hold around Blanche to ensure she wouldn't slip.

Finally, we reached the center of the glacier—a vast, open expanse where the ice was so clear it seemed to trap the very sky within it. In the middle of this expanse stood a towering figure, his form ever-shifting between a swirling vortex of snow and ice and the outline of a human-like silhouette. This was Borealis, the ancient Spirit of Winter, whose presence commanded the very elements around us. He watched our approach, his eyes glistening like frozen stars, cold and distant and deeply inhuman.

When Borealis finally spoke, his voice echoed through the icy expanse, a deep, resonant sound that carried the weight of eons; it reverberated through the ice and snow, as though he spoke not through a humanlike voice that traveled through air, but somehow communicated through the elements of winter themselves. “Frost, Keeper of Winter. You tread upon sacred ground, where few dare to venture. What is it that you seek from me?”

I hesitated, the gravity of the situation pressing down on me, before stepping forward. “Borealis, I seek your help.” My voice was steady, but I couldn’t entirely mask the deep, hidden desperation that lay beneath the surface.

The frost-shrouded air seared my lungs as I took a deep breath. “I seek to save a soul—a mortal woman whose fate has become intertwined with mine. Her soul is destined to be claimed by me...but I wish to find a way to let her live beyond her appointed time.”

Borealis’s form shifted from a towering figure to a swirling blizzard as he regarded Blanche with an unreadable expression, as though weighing her worth. “You, who have served the balance for eons, now seek to disrupt the cycle?” There was no anger in his voice, only a thread of curiosity beneath the mighty but emotionless tone.

I bowed my head, my voice soft but resolute. “Yes.”

A deep, chilling silence fell over the glacier as the wind stilled. Borealis’s gaze pierced through me, as if searching the very core of my being. “To defy the ancient laws is to invite chaos. The balance of life and death, of winter and spring, is not something to be taken lightly. To help you understand, there is something I must show you.” He turned, motioning with a swirl of snow for us to accompany him.

The cold, crystalline silence of Borealis’s glacier fortress was broken only by the faint crackle of ice underfoot as we followed the ancient Spirit of Winter. Dim light refracted through the layers of ice that formed the cavernous walls, casting shimmering patterns that danced across our path. At any other time I would have admired the craftsmanship, but now tension choked the air, the weight of my choices pressing down on me like the heavy ice overhead.

Borealis moved with an ethereal grace, his form shifting and changing with each step—sometimes solid, sometimes a swirling mist of snow and frost. Though I had walked through winter for centuries, a sense of unease crept into my soul in this domain, where my own powers felt small and insignificant.

Finally, we reached a vast chamber, its walls lined with intricate patterns of frost that seemed to pulse with a faint, ancient power. At the center stood a towering pillar of window-like ice, within which a swirling storm raged, captured and held in stasis.

Borealis paused before it, his gaze fixed on the chaotic whirls of snow. “Do you see it, Frost?” His voice echoed softly, laden with meaning. “This is the heart of winter, the essence of the season you have commanded for eons—the balance of life and death, of cold and warmth, of stillness and movement. But now...”

I stepped closer, my eyes narrowing as I peered into the pillar. The storm within was not as it should have been. The winds howled violently, the snow swirling in

chaotic patterns, crashing against the icy walls as if trying to break free. The once-perfect symmetry was gone, replaced by a growing turbulence that gnawed at the edges of the frozen structure.

“Now it is out of balance,” Borealis continued, his voice a low, mournful whisper. “The winter you have nurtured is becoming a force of destruction rather than the bringer of rest and renewal it’s meant to be. The cold is no longer just a time of slumber for the world, but a threat to all life, pushing beyond its natural bounds.”

The enormity of my actions settled heavily in my chest. “This is because I disrupted the cycle to save her.”

Borealis turned to me. “When you chose to spare a mortal whose life had reached its natural end, you set into motion a chain of events that disrupted the balance. Winter must have its end; without it, the cold grows unchecked, consuming everything in its path.”

The weight of Borealis’s words settled heavily over me. Deep down, I’d always known that my decision carried consequences, but I had never imagined they would be this severe, affecting not only my personal abilities and domain, but the entire world. I stared at the storm whirling within the pillar, a reflection of the turmoil ravaging my heart.

“There must be a way to restore the balance. Tell me what I must do.”

Borealis studied me for a long moment, his gaze sharp and unyielding. “There is a way, but it will come at a great cost. The balance can only be restored if you reclaim your place as the true Keeper of Winter, which means you must undo what you have done by letting go of the mortal you saved.”

My heart clenched, the unbearable thought stealing my breath. “I can’t let her die. There must be another way.”

Borealis sighed softly, a sound like the whisper of snowflakes falling. “There is no other way, Frost. By choosing to care for a mortal, you have begun to lose the essence of what you are. The signs of your transformation are already evident...not only in her beginning to manifest a portion of your powers the closer you become, but also in the changes taking place within you.”

Borealis extended a hand, and the ice beneath our feet began to shimmer. The surface smoothed, becoming a mirror. I gazed down at my reflection...but it was not how I remembered it.

My once vibrant, icy blue eyes had dimmed, while the frost-like patterns that had always danced across my skin were fading, leaving behind smooth, human-like flesh. My hair, which had once sparkled with the light of fresh snowfall, had lost its luster, becoming dull and ordinary. I reached out to touch my face, only to feel the warmth of my own skin—a warmth that should not have been there.

“I’m...becoming mortal.” The realization momentarily left me speechless. “But how? *Why?*”

“Your bond with her,” Borealis explained, nodding towards Blanche. “Even as your powers have begun to transfer to her, she has tied you to the mortal world. Your feelings and desire to protect her have begun to thaw the frozen heart that is the source of your magic, weakening your connection to winter. And in doing so, you have begun to lose your powers. The more you care for her, the more you become like her—a mortal who is incapable of understanding and making the necessary sacrifices to preserve the balance.”

Panic surged as the implications of Borealis’s words sank in. I had known I was changing due to my deepening feelings for Blanche that were unlike anything I had ever experienced, but this was a fate I had never considered. “I didn’t know sparing

her would come at such a cost.”

“Love and compassion are powerful forces, but they come with a price, one that is too steep—you cannot allow the world to descend into chaos and destruction to save a single person.”

My mind whirled with conflicting emotions. I had spent centuries as the embodiment of winter, a force of nature that was untouchable and eternal. But now, for the first time, I was faced with not only the prospect of truly living...but the weight of eventually dying should I lose all that I was.

I stared at my altered reflection in the shimmering surface, the image now almost like that of a stranger. Yet despite the unfamiliar features, each softened human line carried a memory of our time together, precious moments I could never regret that had warmed my cold existence in ways I never imagined possible. I couldn't imagine returning to my former lone existence after experiencing companionship—not just a friendship, but a deepening, heartfelt relationship.

But at the same time, I couldn't imagine allowing all of humanity to suffer the wrath of an uncontrolled winter, no matter how deeply I cared for Blanche. As I considered it, the warmth that had begun to thaw my frozen heart was tinged with a deep, gnawing fear. The thought of relinquishing all I had ever been and changing the course of history for the worse seemed unfathomable, especially for the fleeting time that measured a mortal's existence. And yet...

“I don't know what to do,” I whispered, uncertainty making my voice barely audible as I met Borealis's unyielding gaze.

Borealis's form moved closer to place a cold hand on my shoulder, the touch both comforting and heavy with the weight of our shared history, a reminder of the duty I had carried for eons. “Nothing can be allowed to stand in the way of preserving the flow of the seasons. I am truly sorry to ask you to make such a choice, but the balance must be restored.”

Bitterness rose that Borealis could call it a choice while claiming that it was the only path. I felt a soft hand slide into mine, Blanche's warmth stilling the blizzard inside me for just a moment.

Her voice was soft, yet filled with an urgency that mirrored my own. “There must be another way, one where we don't have to lose each other...and where you don't have to lose who you are. We can find it together.” Tears brimmed in her eyes, reflecting the flickering light from the icy walls, and her hands clutched mine, her grip a lifeline in the storm of my emotions.

“Blanche...” My voice broke. “I cannot take your soul, knowing what it would mean for you...and for me. I love you. Thus I cannot bear to lose you.”

Her breath caught at my confession, and for a moment joy lit her features, a stark contrast to the worry that had clouded them moments before. But this emotion was quickly overshadowed by fear as she realized the weight of my words.

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she leaned into my touch, her voice trembling. “I love you, too. Which means we must find another way to keep winter's balance without losing you. Surely this is not the only possible path.”

Her plea struck me deeply, a reminder of the duty I had upheld for so long. Could I truly abandon that for my own happiness? My mind whirled with conflicting thoughts, but even amidst the uncertainty, one precious truth began to crystallize in my heart.

Borealis was silent for a long moment, watching us with a mixture of curiosity and sadness, as if aware of the battle that had been raging within me. “It appears this love for something so fleeting and fragile has exceeded even that of the season you've been charged with preserving.” His statement bore the note of grim finality.

At my nod, Borealis released a long, weary sigh. “If your love is sincere, and if it is strong enough to stand up to great testing, there is—”

“Another way,” Blanche breathed, her fingers tightening around mine.

Borealis’ inhuman eyes flicked towards her before nodding briefly. “But it requires a price beyond what most would agree to. Are you willing to pay the cost should you succeed?”

As I stood with the cold wind swirling around me, the storm within the pillar raged on, a reminder of the consequences of my actions as well as the fragile balance that depended on my choice. A chill ran through me that had nothing to do with the cold.

I took a deep, shuddering breath. “What is the cost? I will do whatever needs to be done.” Despite my gnawing unease, resolve made my voice steady.

Borealis shifted, his form becoming more solid as his gaze narrowed on me. “The price is your immortality.” His pronouncement echoed across the glacier.

At his heavy pronouncement, Blanche spun to face me with a horrified gasp. “No, Frost. You can’t make such a sacrifice. I’m not worth—”

I couldn’t bear for her to conclude that thought. I cradled her face, silencing her remaining protests. “You will *always* be worth it, Blanche. Don’t let the regrets you feel for past mistakes make you doubt that you deserve love. Now that I’ve met you, I could never go back to the incomplete existence I endured before you came into my life; eternity is meaningless without you.”

My gaze fell back to my reflection, now more human than ever before. But it was more than a reflection of an immortal being losing his powers—I saw a man who had tasted love and had begun to thaw from the inside out; the frost that had once defined me was melting away, replaced by something warmer, more fragile, and infinitely more precious.

While with that thaw came the terrifying prospect of mortality—of a life lived and then lost, marked by weakness rather than control of the elements—looking at Blanche standing before me with love and fear warring in her eyes confirmed what my heart had long known: while winter was something I would always cherish, the season that had once been my only joy could never compare to her.

My heart clenched at the thought of losing Blanche, of watching her slip away like the snow in spring. What was my magic if it meant I lost her, or an entire eternity without the warmth she’d brought into my life?

I closed my eyes, battling the flood of emotions that threatened to overwhelm me. Memories of my past surfaced—centuries spent as the embodiment of winter, a force of nature that was untouchable and eternal. I had believed myself content then, detached from the world without ever knowing the depth of love, the ache of longing, or the fear of loss. But now, faced with the prospect of truly living—and dying—this once clear path seemed terrifyingly uncertain.

My heart was heavy with the decision that lay before me—the woman who had brought warmth to my cold existence, or the world I had sworn to protect? It was an impossible choice, one that tore at the very fabric of my being. Though my powers were an intricate, cherished part of me, what was my magic or my eternal existence if they meant I lost her?

“What happens to the world if Frost gives up his position?” Blanche’s voice distracted me from my swirling thoughts, and I glanced at the woman who had transformed from someone who’d never cared beyond her own pleasure to someone who faced an immortal being with concern for the fate of others.

Borealis met my gaze. “I will assume Frost’s responsibilities. Perhaps in time a new, worthy Keeper may be found and trained. But for now I will maintain the

balance along with my own duties of monitoring and establishing the magical laws.”

A chill ran down my back that had nothing to do with the frigid temperatures. Borealis would do an admirable job of keeping order, creating storms, and dutifully harvesting souls. But one thing that had sparked tension between us in the past had been a disagreement on these precious human lives: while I took my duties seriously and never shrank from collecting the souls of those who had died due to the cold I nurtured, I had insisted on only taking those who naturally succumbed to winter.

In contrast, Borealis had at times urged me to bolster my power and better protect the balance by creating larger, more deadly storms or even targeting specific individuals who would be vulnerable should a sudden blizzard arise.

I shuddered to think of a winter under his dispassionate oversight. While I had never found my emotions involved before Blanche, I had always respected the humans who lived under my care. Yet the alternative was unthinkable.

“I cannot lose her,” I said, the finality in my voice surprising me. “But I also cannot let the world suffer for my choices. I will do whatever it takes to restore the balance. If that means giving up my immortality, then so be it.”

Blanche gasped and reached for me. I pulled her into a tight embrace, feeling the warmth of her body against my own—a warmth that had become more precious to me than any magic I had ever wielded.

Borealis sighed, his form solidifying into a towering figure. “Before you may make such a consequential decision, you must face the trial, Frost, to see where your heart truly lies and whether you have the strength to follow through with what you think you desire now. Once you have observed what I will show you, the choice will be yours. If you remain firm in your current decision, you may choose to become mortal, bound to the same cycle you wish to break. You will live and die as all mortals do, and the power of winter will no longer be yours to command. Only the sacrifice of something dear to you can change the course of fate.”

Blanche tried to protest, but I silenced her with a gentle kiss, pouring all my love and resolve into it. I stared into her eyes as I pulled away. “This is my choice, Blanche, one I make gladly.”

As we stood together, the ice beneath our feet began to shimmer, reflecting not just our images, but the love and sacrifice that bound us.

The cold wind howled around us as we turned to face the trial ahead, and I knew that whatever the cost, I would do all in my power to keep her. No matter the outcome of the unknown before us, with her my life would never be the same again thanks to all of the love she had brought to my previously unchanging life.

## CHAPTER 17



### *Blanche*

The glacial surroundings of Borealis's frozen citadel gradually faded as the air shifted with a magic unlike any I'd experienced since entering Frost's realm—rather than a shimmer of light or gust of wind, there was only overwhelming cold, so intense it stole the breath from my lungs.

Frost's hand tightened around mine as the ground beneath us seemed to vanish, replaced by a strange sensation of falling—not through space but through time, into something deeper and older than the world we knew. The cold wrapped around us, a sensation sharper and more ancient than the chill of winter I'd grown accustomed to, coiling around me like icy fingers dragging me into darkness.

The world twisted, as though reality itself was bending. My vision blurred, swallowed by a swirling sea of snow and ice, endless and suffocating. I tried to move, to call out to Frost, but my voice was swallowed by the void.

Then, just as suddenly as the disorienting shifting had begun, it stopped. I caught my breath, blinking as I took in the unfamiliar surroundings. Around us loomed towering walls of crystalline ice branching into various paths whose destinations I could not see, so smooth and clear they reflected our figures in a thousand fractured images, distorting reality into endless illusions. The shimmering surfaces seemed alive, shifting with the light as though the labyrinth itself was breathing.

Frost pulled me to my feet, his eyes already scanning the intricate maze with a practiced, wary gaze. Magic lingered in the air, sharp and ancient, pulsing beneath our feet, as if the ground could vanish at any moment. The biting cold choking the air seemed more sentient than the mere chill of winter—alive, aware, and watching.

Frost drew in a sharp breath, his features tightening in recognition. "Borealis has sent us to the FrostVeil Labyrinth," he said, voice edged with tension. "I hoped we wouldn't have to face this."

My chest tightened, an unspoken fear settling in the pit of my stomach. The dread clouding his usual calm, unshakable demeanor had shifted to a tension I hadn't seen before, even with the stress of losing his powers.

"What is this place?"

Jaw clenched, Frost exhaled slowly, his breath visible in the freezing air. "The FrostVeil Labyrinth isn't just any maze—it's carved deep within Borealis's glacier fortress. It's ancient, alive, and constantly shifting and changing to disorient anyone who dares to enter...but the true purpose lies at its heart."

He glanced toward the center of the labyrinth, though the ice walls obscured our view, I could sense he knew exactly what lay within. "At the center of this maze is

the FrostHeart—the heart of winter itself...and the source of my power.”

“The heart of winter?” My throat tightened with apprehension; I didn’t understand what the heart of winter entailed, but the note of dread in his tone made it clear that it was not a place to approach lightly.

He nodded grimly, his gaze darkening. “The FrostHeart holds the purest essence of winter’s balance. It’s what allows me to create snow, control the blizzards, and maintain the cycle of the season. Without it, winter would spiral into chaos. But it’s dangerous not because of the difficulty of finding it, but because it demands sacrifice. To reach it means facing trials, and those who make it to the center don’t leave unchanged.”

The weight of his explanation pressed down on me. “And Borealis sent us here?”

Frost’s usual icy calm cracked further, replaced by something sharper and more urgent. “Borealis guards the FrostHeart closely. He’s the only one with the power to place one of Season’s Keepers on trial before it. By sending us here, my abilities as the Winter King are not only being tested, but I’ll have to decide between two paths: severing my connection to the mortal world entirely, sacrificing the last shred of humanity I have left...or abandoning my power altogether and becoming mortal, leaving Borealis to take my place as Keeper of Winter.”

My breath fogged the icy air as the weight of his explanation settled over me like the air’s biting chill. This wasn’t just a labyrinth or a puzzle to solve—it was a trial of the highest stakes that would decide Frost’s fate, testing not only his powers but his very soul. Yet there was no turning back from the path ahead, shrouded in ice and uncertainty.

The icy wind bit at my skin as we crossed the threshold of the labyrinth, its soul-penetrating chill far deeper than the frigid air. Silence hung thick and heavy, broken only by the soft crunch of our footsteps and the occasional groan of shifting ice beneath us, as though the maze itself were alive and responding to our presence.

My thoughts whirled faster than the winter wind swirling through the twisting corridors. The weight of his confession filled the frozen space around us with a warmth no fire could match, making my heart flutter in a way I hadn’t thought possible in such a cold, desolate place.

*He loved me.*

I could hardly believe that the mystical, enigmatic figure who commanded the very essence of winter felt the same fierce emotion for me that I did for him. I wanted to hold onto that moment forever, to stay wrapped in the safety of his affection and let the world fade away. Despite the dire nature of our current predicament, happiness surged through me like the first sunlight after a long winter, warming parts of my heart I hadn’t realized were frozen.

I squeezed his hand as we walked, savoring the coolness of his skin against mine. Even as the elation of his love filled me, a shadow crept in alongside it, tempering my joy with the reminder of the cost of this love. I wasn’t ready to let him sacrifice so much for me, nor could I stand the thought of him losing any part of himself that I had come to love.

As we moved deeper into the labyrinth—choosing our steps carefully between the swaying walls—I dwelt on the way it felt to finally give voice to the feelings I’d tried to push aside for so long. Yet worry gnawed at me—Frost was preparing to sacrifice not just his immortality, but his powers...all for a regret-laden soul. I couldn’t bear for him to lose his identity as the Winter King, the man who had shown me the beauty in his cold, austere world.



Frost had been quiet since we entered the labyrinth, his distant gaze betraying an inner battle I couldn't fully understand. His silence pulled at me, stirring my own anxiety until it felt like the cold itself had crept into my bones.

My worry drew his attention. His eyes softened, his serious countenance melting just enough to show the tenderness I knew so well.

"You're troubled." His quiet tone cut through the eerie silence cloaking the labyrinth.

I bit my lip as I glanced at my taut expression reflected in the ever-shifting walls of ice around us, as though the maze was echoing the conflict inside me. "It wasn't until that frozen night in the alley when I was faced with death that I realized how little I had truly lived. You helped me find myself, and I can't bear the thought of it coming at the cost of you giving everything up for me."

We paused in front of a towering ice wall and he turned to me, his blue eyes locking onto mine, colder than the ice, yet holding a warmth only I seemed to see. His hand brushed my cheek, the chill of his fingers sharp against my skin, the familiarity of his touch offering a comfort that grounded me when everything else made me feel like I was falling.

"I've lived for centuries as the Keeper of Winter," he said softly. "I've maintained balance and watched over this world, but in all that time I never felt alive...until I met you."

My heart raced at his words, but worry maintained its clinging hold, refusing to let go. "I don't want to be the reason you lose what makes you...*you*. You're part of something bigger—your power, your connection to winter...how could you sacrifice all of that?" My voice trembled, thick with the weight of my fear.

His expression softened further and he cupped my face gently, his thumb brushing against my cheek. "I don't know," he admitted. "But I do know I am more than just winter, just as you are more than your own past. I would give anything to be with you and keep this love that you've shown me. Though winter will always be a part of me, in the end it's just a season...and it's time for my own to finally come to an end and for a new one to begin, a spring that only you can offer. Whatever happens, I'll never regret loving you."

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as I leaned into his touch. Though I couldn't regret that these last precious moments with him had finally possessed meaning and happiness, I wasn't ready to lose him—not to this trial, nor the sacrifice looming over us like the icy walls of the labyrinth. There *had* to be a way for us to be together without him giving up everything he had built across the eternity he had existed.

I nodded, blinking back tears, and we continued walking through the shifting maze stretching around us in every direction. My grip on his hand tightened, as if holding him close could somehow keep him from slipping away. Whatever lay ahead, we would face it together.

The narrow path we walked suddenly split beneath our feet. Frost caught me as my feet skidded on the ice. Walls slid into place, outlining three icy corridors stretching before us in different directions, each as cold and ominous as the last. Through the mist ahead, I could barely discern the faint outline of a mirror at the end of each path. Frost and I exchanged an uncertain glance before wordlessly choosing the first route.

What we hadn't noticed from the entrance to the path was that the mirror in the distance wasn't the only one—the walls were lined with reflective panels. The path began to curve and bend, obscuring the end. The mirrors fractured our images into pieces, then seemed to multiply until I was completely disoriented, surrounded by

dozens of reflections of Frost and myself.

Our steps slowed as we tried to gain our bearings. The walls continued to shift. I fell against Frost as a mirror-lined sheet of ice suddenly pressed against me. Panic rose, and I wondered if we'd be trapped here indefinitely or crushed between the heavy walls.

Frost pushed back against the icy sheet and quickly assessed our surroundings, trying to guess where the walls would shift next and which direction we needed to move. Seized by a sudden thought, he turned to me, tightening his grip on my hand.

"Close your eyes," he whispered.

I stared at him in bewilderment. "What?"

"Our vision is only disorienting us, as the labyrinth intends. To reach our destination, we must find another way."

Closing my eyes inside a magical, sinister maze was the last thing I wanted to do, but I met Frost's gaze and nodded shutting my eyes. I trusted him. His footsteps shuffled against the ground as he cautiously led me sideways.

"I'm shutting my eyes as well, and I'm going to try and keep my left hand on the wall," he said. "If we keep moving along one wall, rather than trying to follow where the mirrors seem to lead us, we should eventually get there."

Though it felt like it took a snippet of Frost's eternity, we slowly edged forward, stumbling at times as the wall abruptly shifted, but managing to progress.

At long last he finally stopped. "You can open your eyes now."

I blinked in the dim light. The pathway lay still for the moment, the large mirror at the end silent and waiting. The air grew heavier as we approached the mirror, our reflections rippling across the surface. My breath caught as the glass shimmered and the image shifted to reveal a vision of Frost alone. He stood in a world of endless snow, his expression serious, his shoulders weighed down by the mantle of his duties.

I watched as he crafted delicate snowflakes, each one a masterpiece of crystalline perfection, before sending them spiraling into the air with a flick of his fingers. The wind howled at his command, carrying blizzards to distant lands. I could almost feel the pull of his magic through the glass as he reached out to collect the frozen souls of those whose time had come, gently cradling them in his icy grasp.

This was the man I adored doing the work he loved, and yet...it wasn't. His eyes, once filled with yearning and tenderness, were now cold and distant, frozen over with a steely resolve I hadn't seen in him for some time—as if the flicker of humanity kindled by our love that I had come to cherish was now buried beneath layers of frost, as if he'd withdrawn into the very essence of winter itself.

Though he remained the master of the season, the spark of empathy and understanding that had begun to thaw the cold within him had been dimmed, leaving his heart untouched by the connection from when our fates became so entwined.

My heart clenched in sorrow at the sight of his isolation with magic as his only companion. Instinctively I reached for his reflection, my fingers brushing against his arm as the image dissolved, the mirror fading back into the icy wall. We stood in silence, the weight of the vision hanging between us, thick with unseen possibilities.

We eventually retraced our steps, the walls standing still and silent this time. Exchanging a glance, we ventured down the next path, where another mirror awaited us at the end, its glass swirling with shadows and light. This path was also lined with mirrors, but rather than a confusing maze, these seemed to be glimpses of other places, locations I longed to explore.

I paused to stare at a sun-drenched meadow, complete with cheerful daisies and a sumptuous picnic for two invitingly spread on the grass. Suddenly more aware of the cold that seemed in such contrast to the warm image, I ventured a step closer, anxious for a better look. Frost's hand tightened on mine.

"It's an illusion, but one that will trap you," he warned. He nodded his head towards the wall on his side, which showed a stunning castle of ice and snow, even grander than the one Frost had built. On a turret stood the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, ethereal and enchanting, beckoning with a smile.

Frost edged away from the wall past the enticing vision, but his steps slowed when he saw an image of a child, shivering as a biting wind swirled around him and holding out a desperate hand for help. I felt him leaning towards it and frantically tugged at him.

"Look at me," I whispered. "If we keep our eyes on each other, we can't be led astray."

We finally made our way to the end of this corridor, gazes fixed on each other, until we turned to face the end wall. I felt Frost tense beside me, his usual calm wavering as we approached, and I braced myself for whatever torment this mirror would reveal.

The glass shimmered, then cleared, revealing a vision of Frost living amongst mortals—no longer a life of eternal winter or boundless power, but one marked by fleeting moments of joy, laughter, and warmth. I saw him standing in a sunlit field, bathed in the golden glow of a late summer day. His expression, so often etched with the weight of his role as Winter's Keeper, was softer, and he smiled in a new way, free from the mantle of winter's icy grip, as though he had never known the burden of his icy crown.

Yet as the vision continued, its contents eventually shifted, revealing the full truth of what it meant to embrace humanity—not just the fleeting happiness but the inevitable hardships that accompanied it. Mingled with the moments of joy were heartache, sickness, and the creeping shadow of death Frost could no longer escape without his previous immortality.

I saw Frost kneeling by my bedside, his face drawn with grief as illness took its toll on me; I watched him age, his once-youthful features lined with the passage of time as his strength waned while the weight of mortality pressed down upon him, the vitality that had once shone in his eyes faded.

This life, if he chose it, wouldn't be a dream of endless happiness...though it would be a complete experience—rich with both love and sorrow, laughter and tears, where every finite moment mattered. Frost would feel the warmth of human touch, but also the cold bite of mortality...and one day his body would fail him, and I would be forced to watch him wither, piece by piece.

My chest tightened as I watched the life that could be ours. There was something profoundly beautiful in the simplicity in his movements of a man living an ordinary life no longer bound to the seasons. The thought of living a life free from the barriers of his immortality where every finite moment mattered was intoxicating—a life where we could walk hand in hand, share the warmth of the sun, and experience the joys and sorrows of a mortal existence together—real, messy, and heartbreakingly beautiful. Could I savor such a life with him, even at the cost of being forced to watch him suffer and age, knowing that time would eventually steal him from me, whittling his lifespan down from infinite millennia to a handful of decades?

As I wrestled with these emotions, the vision shifted once more, revealing the full price of such a choice—not just for Frost and the magic he wielded, but for the

world and the balance he maintained; Borealis would take his place as Winter's Keeper.

Whereas Frost's touch balanced sleet and howling winds with gentle snowfalls and quiet stillness, Borealis would wield winter like an unyielding storm, commanding blizzards with unrelenting ferocity to increase his power and glory in his might. Bitter frost would dominate as the world shivered under Borealis's reign, his icy winds shrieking across the land with little regard for the humans that Frost had respected for so long. Winter would be robbed of its beauty and meaning—no longer would it be a time of rest and refreshment between growing seasons, with the magic of frosted windowpanes and hot chocolate after sleigh rides, but a daily struggle for survival.

This decision was about more than just us and our feelings for one another—it was about the preservation of the seasons and the mortals who would suffer under harsher winters. Should Frost choose mortality, the world would be forever changed.

When the vision melted away this mirror also vanished, leaving us with nothing but the cold air between us. I hesitated before slowly turning to Frost, needing to know how he felt in the face of such a choice. His expression was unreadable, his gaze still fixed on the space where the mirror had stood, as if he could still see the life and death it had shown him...along with the dire cost.

"What are you thinking?" I started to reach for his hand but then drew back, not wanting to influence him as he wrestled with such a decision.

He turned to me, his eyes softening as they met mine, the warmth of his gaze cutting through the chill that had settled in my heart. "I see the life I could have with you," he murmured. "But I also see the burden it would bring...not just for me, but for the world I've sworn to protect."

He said nothing more, but his hand tightened around mine as we moved back down the hallway and faced the final path.

As we took the first step down the corridor, a powerful wind gusted against us and my hand slipped from Frost's. I gasped as I stumbled into the wall, where the mirrored panels reflected nothing but darkness. Frost reached towards me, but the icy path between us cracked, forming a chasm deeper than I could see and trapping him with no way forward.

Frost extended a hand, summoning his magic, but his features sagged in despair as he remembered that his powers were dormant here in the presence of more powerful enchantment. Clenching his jaw, he crouched and sprang over the fissure towards me. He made it nearly to the other side, frantic fingers catching the edge as he nearly fell. With shaking hands, I knelt to help pull him up, and this time he wrapped his arm securely around me, holding me tightly to his side as we continued forward.

The path offered no further resistance. Our footsteps echoed in the silence as we approached the final mirror. This time, the reflection awaiting us was darker, more twisted, casting a chill even colder than the frozen air around us. As the vision began to unfold, I barely recognized the figure before me—Frost, but not as I'd ever known him.

He sat upon a jagged throne of ice, looming high above a barren wasteland frozen in perpetual winter. His expression had hardened beyond recognition, his once-piercing eyes now cold and empty, devoid of the warmth or compassion that had once flickered there. This was not the Frost who had risked everything to save me and who had learned to embrace the delicate balance of his power—this was a ruler consumed by winter, no longer its protector but its tyrant who allowed the

season to devour all within its icy reach, worse even than Borealis's dispassionate rule would be.

The court surrounding him was filled with what appeared to be a court of frozen statues, standing in silent submission to their icy monarch. My heart twisted in horror when upon closer examination I realized they weren't statues but *people*—innocent souls Frost's power had claimed, frozen in time after he had imprisoned them in eternal winter, bound to him for all eternity to fuel his power yet unable to fill the endless void filling his heart.

The vision shifted, showing cities buried beneath thick layers of snow and ice, entire civilizations reduced to ghostly remnants. No laughter or warmth remained, no light pierced the heavy clouds that choked the sky. The inhabitants were frozen where they stood—caught in the streets, huddled in their homes, claimed by the relentless cold. Frost walked among them, indifferent to their suffering as he surveyed his handiwork with cool approval.

A shudder rippled through me as I realized this was the fate of the world should he fulfill his duty and claim my soul after learning to love me—the pain of his grief and the bleakness of an eternity alone wresting away the compassion that had always resided in his heart and had blossomed along with our growing relationship. Without me, his unyielding power would grow unchecked, warping him into this cold, merciless figure who no longer safeguarded the season's balance he once valued, but instead let winter consume everything in its path...including himself.

As much as I yearned, I couldn't tear my eyes away from the scene, my hand trembling in his. Sorrow clenched my heart and the weight of the vision pressed down on me, a cruel reminder of the fate Frost would face should he lose the love we had forged once my soul moved on as was nature's proper course—alone, untouched by warmth or love, his power so absolute that it destroyed the very world he had once sought to protect.

This trial wasn't just about Frost's immortality, or even saving or losing me—it would decide whether Frost could hold onto his humanity...or let winter consume him entirely.

## CHAPTER 18



The weight of the visions of Frost's potential futures lingered, pressing against my shoulders like a heavy cloak—the fleeting joy of love and laughter alongside the inevitable cost of mortality, living a life with the man I loved but bound to a life of aging, suffering, and inevitable death.

I glanced at him for his reaction, but his expression remained unreadable, his icy mask firmly in place...even as I caught a glimpse of his unspoken thoughts hidden in his eyes.

"Frost?" I ventured, my voice barely more than a whisper in the frozen silence.

He hesitated, the faintest undetectable flicker crossing his face. For a moment, I thought he might not answer, but then his gaze locked onto mine, intense and unyielding. My heart skipped a beat, unsure if I was ready for whatever he was about to say.

"I didn't quite realize all that I was risking when I chose not to collect your soul."

His quiet words barely carried in the cold air, but they hit me like a sudden gust of wind. "But...I thought you were unable to collect my soul." That anomaly had led him to bring me to his winter realm, allowing us to experience all we had together.

He exhaled shakily. "That was true in the beginning, but no longer...in fact, not for some time now. Your soul was initially tethered by unfulfillment, binding you in a life you subconsciously knew to be incomplete. But now having experienced love and learning to forgive yourself for your past, your existence feels complete, freeing you to move on. I believe the reason my powers have been fading is because I've been resisting my duty to claim you despite now being able to." His voice faltered, and for the first time since we entered the labyrinth, fear filled his gaze. "That choice and what's followed because of it is the reason the balance is tipping."

My breath caught in my throat as the truth settled over me. From the moment I entered this realm, I had known I wouldn't leave it alive, but to realize that the love I had sought my entire life and this beautiful connection we shared now jeopardized the balance left me reeling.

It took a long moment for me to find my voice, and even longer to push past the emotion clogging my throat. "If you've had the power to claim me, with all at stake, why haven't you—"

Heartache filled his eyes as he cradled my cheek, his cool touch featherlight against my skin. "I...couldn't. Even with the balance at risk, it seems inconsequential to an existence without you."

A blizzard of conflicting emotions whirled inside me. Sensing my distress, he reached for me, but I instinctively pulled away, overwhelmed by this sudden, crushing realization. Not wanting him to see the tears already spilling down my

cheeks, I turned and stumbled blindly as I tried to distance myself.

As if the magic filling the labyrinth sensed my need to be alone, a gust of icy wind rushed through the corridor, tugging at my cloak and pulling me into a chamber I hadn't noticed before.

The room was stark and empty, save for a single mirror standing tall against the far wall. I recoiled, remembering the three visions we'd already endured, but unlike the others, this one wasn't clouded with visions of the future, its clear glass reflecting only me standing alone in Frost's vast, frozen realm that had become both deeply familiar and incredibly dear to me.

I stared at the mirror for a long moment, torn between curiosity and dread. But drawn to the glass, I finally took a tentative step forward, my fingers trembling as they brushed its surface. The mirror's contents didn't shift, but offered clarity as I stared into my reflection. Memories of my life played out in my mind across the stage of reminiscence, allowing me to once more re-experience my life through the lens of the growth I'd experienced since meeting Frost.

I closed my eyes, remembering the way my own heart had changed, releasing the bitterness I'd clung to and learning to care about others. Then my mind was flooded with images of Frost—the curious way he'd first watched me and how this emotion had slowly evolved into the deepest affection I'd ever experienced. His face had transformed from that of a cold immortal to a loving...human. But was humanity his true destiny when it meant losing the abilities that were integral to his identity?

I bit my lip as I contemplated the possible futures from the mirrors we'd seen earlier. The first one was impossible; there was no way for Frost to return to a state of not knowing me. But each of the other two seemed to be unspeakable choices: in either case Frost would lose something precious—whether his immortality or his humanity—and the world would suffer. I was beginning to understand why he had shown such dread when he said that no one escaped the labyrinth unchanged.

While Frost had been bound by his duties and the balance of the seasons, I knew that the choice before me was mine alone. I could see the path where Frost and I could be together, living our days with fleeting joy and sorrow in ephemeral mortal bliss that would bring me more love and happiness than I had ever thought possible...or letting him remain as he was, a protector of winter, bound to his eternal duty.

Though the idea of sharing a life with him was intoxicating, my heart ached, torn between the love I had finally found and the realization that keeping it would doom the man I loved. By choosing me, Frost would lose his connection to the power that made him who he was. He would no longer be the Keeper of Winter and the creator of the season's beauty; instead winter would become harsh and unrelenting without Frost's gentle hand to balance the cold, causing the cycle of the seasons to be forever disrupted...although it seemed that whether or not I stayed with Frost, the world was doomed to suffer winter cruelty.

I glanced back at the mirror again, staring at my image. As though a silent voice communicated to me through the reflective depths, I realized something—something I'd never known before, but which could change everything.

I sank down to the icy floor, trying to process what I'd just learned and how it affected my decision. After a long moment with a deep breath I shakily rose to my feet, laying one hand on the glass.

Despite the longings enfolding my breaking heart that finally provided the meaning I'd spent my entire life searching for, I knew I couldn't make the selfish choice. Until I met Frost, I had spent my life seeking my own desires without

thought of the potential consequences. But now was the time to do the right thing and finally choose something greater than myself rather than my own desires, not just for Frost but for all those who depended on the balance he maintained.

Magic tingled against my fingertips as I pressed my other hand to my chest, as if Frost's powers were intertwining with my own, allowing me to faintly feel the threads of my soul. While I mourned the thought of leaving Frost behind and losing the joy we had created together, I knew my life had ended the moment I died in that frozen alley. Every moment I'd spent with him and the time in this realm had been a merciful gift granted beyond my allotted time—a chance to understand what it truly meant to live. But now it was time for my soul to move on, setting the natural rhythm of life and death back on its proper course.

Even knowing the gravity of the consequences, the selfishness that my time in poverty hadn't fully overcome still longed for that future with him—to feel the warmth of his hand in mine, to share in the fleeting moments of joy and sorrow that made life so precious—even as deep down I knew I couldn't ask him to forsake his power and his very essence for the sake of love. True love meant accepting him as he was—the embodiment of winter, eternal and unchanging—and protecting him from losing his identity.

I swallowed hard and lifted my hand from the glass. As I did, the mirror shimmered and began to vanish, just like the others. In its place, a door of ice appeared, faintly glowing as if beckoning me forward. I hesitated, my breath fogging in the cold air as I stared at the door, my heart racing at the thought of what lay beyond.

As I walked through, I found Frost waiting for me, his expression raw with pain and longing. The moment I stepped into the room, he hurried forward, pulling me into a tight embrace. “Are you alright?”

Still too overcome to speak, I nodded, sinking into the comfort of his arms for perhaps the last time.

He let out a shaky breath of relief, holding me closer. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to overwhelm you with what I said about your soul.”

I didn't respond, just pressed closer, savoring the warmth of his embrace for as long as I had remaining; now that I knew the choice that had to be made, every moment felt bittersweet.

It was some time before we finally pulled apart and examined the chamber we found ourselves in. It was unlike anything I'd seen—at its center stood a massive crystal, pulsing with cold light, surrounded by a barrier of air so frigid it made the entire labyrinth feel warm by comparison.

Frost approached slowly, standing before the crystal with a look torn between awe and dread as he took in the source of his power, the very core of winter itself. “To restore the balance and prevent the future we foresaw in the final mirror, I must sever the last remnants of my mortal self—forsaking the life I've built beyond my sacred role. My heart would once more freeze beyond feeling, trapping me in the cold, isolating existence I lived before.”

Conflict raged in his eyes as he looked at me before he slowly lowered his hand. “But I can't. I refuse to lose all the humanity that you have taught me that brought meaning to my otherwise unchanging existence—my emotions, my warmth, my love...and especially *you*.”

The vast chamber fell into a tense silence following his heartfelt declaration save for the soft hum of the FrostHeart at the center, its cold glow casting an ethereal light over everything it touched. The weight of my decision pressed down on me, heavier than the icy atmosphere surrounding us.



Tears welled in my eyes as I stepped towards him. “I can’t ask you to sacrifice everything, Frost. I won’t let you lose yourself for me.” My voice trembled, barely audible over the steady pulse of the crystal.

His eyes widened in horrific understanding. His hand trembled as he reached for me, but he stopped just short of touching me. “I don’t care about the balance. I will sacrifice whatever is required of me—my powers, my immortality—if it means I can be with you.”

I rested my hand on his cheek, my heart aching as I felt the warmth of his skin beneath my palm. “I know, but I can’t let you do that. For once, I need to value something above myself...which means I need to think about something more than just us in order to do what’s right. The balance has to be maintained, no matter what it costs us.” Speaking the words aloud reaffirmed the decision I knew needed to be made, though it didn’t make it any easier.

His hand found mine, cool but steady. I could see the agony in his eyes, his fierce resistance. We had endured so much together, only to reach the moment where the future we had dreamed of together could never be.

After a long silence he finally spoke, his voice low and broken, as though words pained him. “I can’t let you go through with this.”

I met his ice-blue gaze that had seen centuries of winter, that had held both the weight of the world and the tenderness he reserved for me alone. “This is my choice, Frost.” My voice caught as I fought the tears that threatened to blur my vision. “I’m choosing this for you, for the balance, for everything that makes you who you are...and for us.” My heart wrenched at the thought of leaving him, but I knew I could never truly be happy if I chose the life I wanted at such cost to others.

His grip tightened once more, his eyes closing briefly as though memorizing the feel of me before I slipped away. When he opened them again, they were filled with both deep sorrow and an overwhelming love so powerful it made my heart ache.

“I don’t want to lose you,” he whispered, his voice raw with emotion.

My throat tightened and it took every effort not to waver in the decision I knew to be necessary. “You’re the Keeper of Winter, one of the many parts of you I fell in love with. I can’t let you lose yourself just to stay with me.” Despite the tremble in my voice, conviction filled my fierce words.

Frost’s gaze held mine for a long, breathless moment, his expression shifting from anguish to resolve. “Blanche, no. I cannot collect—”

I silenced him with a kiss, the warmth of his lips against mine clashing with the cold that surrounded us. I knew this was the only way. The knowledge I’d gained in the chamber flooded my mind. I’d thought there were only two choices: Frost and I could choose to live a mortal life together, or he could follow through with his duty to collect my soul; either choice came with dire consequences for the man I loved and the world he tended.

But winter’s magic had revealed a third option: if I willingly gave myself to the FrostHeart—allowing it to take not only my soul but my very essence—it would effectively erase me from existence. Frost would be left with no memories of me, no ice record in his library to replay my life; the love we’d experienced would simply disappear. If it was as though he’d never met me, the future from the first mirror would become possible.

I shrank from the thought of every trace of my life vanishing—losing even the chance to remain in Frost’s memory—but this was the only way that could both restore Frost to his immortality and keep the world from suffering. Though the pain of my sacrifice cut deep, I felt the ancient seasonal magic stirring. Through its whispers hope bloomed that perhaps my soul would somehow linger with him in

some small way, even though he wouldn't remember me.

Our kiss ended all too soon, forcing me to withdraw from the comfort of his embrace. Before he could stop me, I stepped past him towards the FrostHeart, pulsing with unyielding power. I caught my breath at the shock of the freezing layer of air as my arm passed through it, but without hesitation I pressed my hand against the ice's cold, crystalline surface, offering up both my soul and every other part of my being. The instant my skin made contact, a wave of icy energy surged through me. I gasped as I felt my essence being drawn from my body. Frost's desperate voice echoed behind me, but his words were lost as the unstoppable process began.

The world around me blurred, fading into a haze as my soul slowly left my body. Through the fog, I caught a glimpse of Frost rushing forward, his face stricken with horror. He reached out, his hands trembling as they hovered over my chest, his touch so gentle and full of love, as though cradling the very essence of who I was.

Tears streaked his cheeks as he lifted his hand, faintly glowing with the frost-etched magic of winter. "I cannot risk any harm befalling you should the process go wrong," he said softly, his voice trembling with emotion. "I will be the one to claim your soul. When I do, you'll no longer be bound to the mortal world, but will become a part of me and of this realm."

I couldn't speak, couldn't tell him that he'd forget me the moment the process was finished. Instead I fought to steady my breathing and offered him a small, broken smile. "I trust you," I whispered.

With a deep breath, he gently cradled my face, his hands cool and comforting. I closed my eyes, leaning into his touch as if I could imprint the sensation of him into my memory forever. Even before he began I felt the pull of his magic, a soft tug at the very core of my being gently unraveling the threads of my soul.

"Blanche." His voice broke through the stillness, low and reverent, as if he were murmuring a prayer. "I never wanted it to end like this, but I care too much for you not to respect your wishes. No matter how painful it is for me, after seeing the life you lived, I want you to finally have a choice of your own."

My eyes fluttered open, and I watched as the ethereal glow of my soul gathered in his hands, a delicate wisp of silver light. I took a sharp breath as the warmth of my life flowed out of me but there was no pain—just a bittersweet peace. Frost's gaze never left mine as he held the glowing tendril of my soul, cradling it as if it were the most precious thing in the world.

His trembling hand hovered over his heart, where the magic of winter thrummed within him. My soul flickered, as though it recognized the place where it was meant to go. Tears filled my eyes, but I held them back, my heart breaking and swelling all at once.

Frost's face twisted in sorrow and love as he leaned forward, resting his forehead against mine. "I love you, Blanche. More than anything." His voice cracked, his body trembling as he continued. "I'll never forget you."

A sharp pain stabbed through me as I realized he could not keep that promise, but I met his eyes. "And I love you," I whispered, my voice thick with emotion. "I always will." That was a vow I would keep for both of us.

His grip tightened on my soul, his other hand pressing gently against my chest where the last faint remnant of my mortal life remained. With a deep, steadying breath he pulled the final threads of my soul free, leaving me weightless, suspended between life and something else entirely.

An undulating light shone from the center of the FrostHeart, shifting between blue and violet, swirling light that seemed to pull at me from deep within. Frost

glanced at it uncertainly before looking back at me, his eyes widening in alarm.

“Blanche!” He stepped forward frantically. “What’s happening?”

Caught between reality and oblivion, I couldn’t reply, but I sensed something happening to my mortal body, as though it was beginning to fade rather than simply lying lifeless.

“You’re...vanishing. Not only your soul, but all of you.” He stared at my blurring form in anguish before returning his gaze to the soul he so tenderly held.

But as my soul hovered in his hands, something unexpected happened. A light—brighter than the surrounding frost—began to glow from his chest, intertwining with the silver wisp of my soul. Our essences merged, and I felt a surge of power flow between us, binding us in a way that neither of us had anticipated.

“What’s happening, Frost?” My whisper was breathless as the warmth spread through me, mingling with the cold, until I no longer felt the frigid air.

His eyes widened with shock, his hands trembling as the light he cradled grew stronger. “I don’t know, but I can feel you. You’re not fading anymore; you’re returning.”

The light enveloped us, bringing with it a rush of clarity and strength. My soul wasn’t being lost to the winter realm—it was becoming part of it, part of him, our hearts and magic fusing in a way neither of us had foreseen. In that union, the pulse of winter’s power surged through me, mingling with my own essence so that I wasn’t just bound to Frost; I was becoming something new that belonged to this realm as much as he did.

“I’m still here,” I murmured in wonder. “With you.”

Frost stared at me in disbelief before with a breathless gasp of relief he pulled me into a tight embrace. “You’re still here.” His cold breath brushed my neck, warm with emotion.

He knelt beside me, his expression caught somewhere between relief and disbelief. His hands, cold yet comforting, held mine as the final remnants of the FrostHeart’s power ebbed away, leaving me feeling different—lighter, yet somehow more grounded, as if the weight of mortality had slipped from me like a discarded cloak.

I hadn’t expected this when I’d given my soul, certain that my destiny had reached its end, my final purpose in life to restore Frost to his true self. Yet here I was, not only still breathing and very much *alive*, but still at his side.

Confusion swirled within me as I gazed up at his dear face, now softened with joy and relief. “What just happened? Why am I still here after offering my soul?”

His wondrous gaze never wavered from mine as he brushed a stray lock of hair from my face, his touch lingering against my skin as though to reassure himself I was real. “I can hardly believe it myself. Though I’ve never witnessed this magic, I understand enough of the ancient power that formed this world for me to theorize that the moment you first entered my winter realm, you began to absorb its magic.”

I blinked, trying to grasp the enormity of his words. He continued, his voice soft but steady, like the hush of falling snow.

“The closer we became, the more you’ve been changing. Every time you touched my magic, wielded a portion of it, or stood by my side, it left its mark on you. Slowly, your mortal essence has been merging with something...*more*.”

My heart pounded with a mixture of hope and wonder. “What do you mean?”

“But it had to be more than that. Because you offered your soul willingly rather than me taking it like the others I’ve collected, the bonds that tied you to mortality were broken.”

I shook my head. “I was supposed to lose my soul and my very essence, so that you could return to the existence you were meant to have. That’s what I was told in the labyrinth.”

Frost’s icy blue eyes softened, his voice filled with quiet awe. “Yet because you obtained the heart of an immortal being, your soul has fused with mine. You’re no longer bound by the cycle of life and death, but your existence has become part of winter’s magic, healing the balance that was threatened by our love. The very love that jeopardized everything is what ultimately saved us—we were both willing to make any sacrifice necessary for the other’s good, and such a love is more powerful than we even realized.”

I stared at him, trying to process the enormity of his revelation. All the fears and anxieties about losing him and forcing him to choose between love and duty no longer loomed over us, dissolving like snow under the first warm breath of spring. The revelation washed over me, a deep sense of peace filling the space where fear had once been.

“Does this mean...” My voice trembled with a mix of awe and disbelief. “We can be together? Forever?”

Light filled Frost’s expression as he nodded. “We can.” Tenderness filled his voice as he cradled my face, his touch cool but filled with love. “We can rule together, not just over winter, but over the world we now share. Together we’ll do more than oversee the season—we’ll bring balance, not only to winter, but to all who depend on it.”

My heart swelled at the thought. No longer was I an outsider in his world, nor was he trapped between love and duty. We were equals, bound not only by love but by the very magic that sustained winter itself. I smiled through my tears. “Winter will be more than just cold and darkness. We’ll bring something new to the season—something kinder, warmer.”

Frost’s lips curved into a rare, genuine smile. “With you by my side, I have no doubt we’ll create something beautiful.”

We embraced, the weight of our shared destiny settling around us like a blanket of fresh snow. As the light around us dimmed to a soft glow, the warmth remained—a testament to the magic that had recognized our shared hearts—and I felt a sense of profound rightness, as if everything had finally aligned. No longer was I simply a mortal trespassing in his immortal world; I was his equal, his partner, sharing the power of winter itself with him.

I rested my head against his chest, smiling softly. Through our sacrifice, we had gained something far greater—each other, forever entwined, with a future that now stretched beyond the limits of time.

## EPILOGUE



The world outside our realm was silent, blanketed in a soft layer of snow, but within the glacier palace the air hummed with a quiet, comforting magic that I had grown intimately familiar with during my time as Frost's wife. I watched the dancing snowflakes through the frost-covered window decorated with the patterns Frost had created in my childhood. My breath no longer fogged the glass—there was no more sharp contrast of mortal warmth against the winter's chill; I was now part of this realm and the endless cycle of winter, and though the cold surrounded me, I had never felt more alive. For the first time in my life I truly belonged.

As I stared across the endless expanse of frost and snow, I marveled at how much this realm had become my home and basked in the sense of purpose I had found here; Frost told me I brought something different to winter now that I was part of its guardianship.

The cold had always been pure and beautiful in its stillness, but now I could add a touch of warmth without disturbing the balance Frost so carefully guarded. The drifting snowflakes seemed to shimmer just a bit brighter, the ice-carved trees possessed the softest glow, and I could feel life beneath each frozen surface, waiting patiently for its time to emerge. Winter no longer felt harsh or isolating, but instead cradled a gentleness, a reminder that even in the coldest season, there was comfort, warmth, and love. This was my role—to bring hope's warmth to the cold, to balance the heart of the season with a tenderness only I could offer.

I was gently tugged from my reminiscences with the arrival of soft padding footsteps—a sound I'd come to know well. A smile tugged my lips. I didn't need to turn to feel Frost's presence; the familiar energy that pulsed from him always called to something deep within me.

He slipped his arms around my waist and pulled me against his chest, his embrace as warm to me as any summer sun. "Admiring your kingdom again?" he murmured into my ear, his breath sending shivers down my spine, though not from the cold.

I leaned back into him, resting my head against his shoulder, and let out a contented sigh. "*Our* kingdom," I corrected.

I felt his lips curve into a smile against my neck. "You always remind me but I still can't get used to it. You, standing here, with me. It feels like something out of a dream." Affection filled his soft voice.

I laughed lightly, tilting my head to meet his gaze. "Then we're both dreaming...and I never want to wake up."

His fingers traced a gentle line down my back before turning me in the cradle of his arms so we faced one another. Even after all this time, I still marveled at him—the way his eyes sparkled with that ice-blue glow, the way his silver hair caught the

light like spun frost, the way his touch remained soft and tender even though he wielded the raw power of winter. He had regained all of his breathtaking immortality...with the added tempering of human compassion. And then there was the way he looked at me, as if even with all he had experienced within his eternal existence, I was the most precious thing in his world.

He brushed a strand of hair—which had transformed in the FrostHeart chamber to both the color and sparkle of fresh snow—from my face. “I never thought I could have you with me, ruling by my side—my beloved Queen of Winter.”

I smiled as I rested my hand on his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath the fabric of his cloak. “Neither did I,” I whispered, my voice full of wonder. “But here we are.”

Frost cupped my cheek, his thumb softly brushing my skin. For a moment, we simply stood there, lost in each other.

There was no need to fill the quiet with anything but the warmth of our connection, one I never would have imagined over the course of my mortal life. Only by it coming to its frozen end had I been able to discover this new beginning beyond anything I could have ever imagined, even amid the wealth and privilege that had once been mine.

We basked in the reverence for a long, beautiful moment until he spoke. “Have you gotten used to the snow yet, my queen? You don’t seem to miss the sun.” His tone was playful, evidence of the happiness he shared.

I raised a teasing eyebrow. “There seems to be plenty of warmth whenever I need it.”

“And yet you still seem to be rather attached to my cloak.” His eyes danced.

The sound of my laughter drew Shiver’s notice; his head poked out from the soft bed where he was curled in a frosty ball and he peered curiously over.

“I admit to the attachment, but not to being cold. It’s pure sentiment for the cloak’s owner.” I snuggled deeper into the cloak before leaning up to press a soft kiss to his lips.

His embrace tightened around me, pulling me closer as he earnestly returned my kiss, his slow and sweet. A mischievous gleam filled his eyes when we parted. “I will do my best to ensure you’re never cold again.”

I laughed again, the sound echoing through the grand halls of the icy palace, and nestled back against him, savoring the feel of him. Outside, the snow fell endlessly, but in this moment everything was perfect in the life we’d carved out together—one built on love, sacrifice, and the unbreakable bond forged in the labyrinth.

I lifted my head as I felt Frost stiffen in surprise. “What is that?” He pointed to the corner of the room, where a cozy fire crackled upon an ice hearth—a blaze I’d kindled with magic this time instead of the poor matches I’d once depended on for my very existence.

“The fire?” I arched an innocent eyebrow. “It’s been there for a while.”

Frost made an impatient noise even as an indulgent smile tugged at his lips. “I’m referring to that large object *beside* the fire that definitely has not been there for a while.”

“Oh, the fir tree? I brought it in this afternoon in honor of the human celebration of Yuletide that occurs every winter.”

Frost chuckled. “I’m rather aware of the tradition.”

“Since it’s our duty to be the best possible caretakers of the human world, I thought it would be useful for us to enter the spirit of the season like the mortals do.”

“Oh really?” My husband’s smile was on full display now.

“Also.” I dropped the bantering tone. “I never got a chance to decorate a tree as a child.”

Frost’s smile vanished. “Did your family not celebrate?”

“Every year my parents threw the grandest party in town. The house was filled with garlands, holly, and the tallest, most magnificent tree that could be found, which was decorated by the servants; I was forbidden to touch a single branch.”

Frost took a deep breath, as he usually did when I relayed a new detail of my past life, before shaking his head and smiling at me again, this time in gentle compassion rather than playfulness. “Then it’s time we decorate your first tree.”

We approached the graceful fir together. Frost contemplated it for a moment, his head tilted thoughtfully to the side, before extending his hand to me. Smiling, I took it and we held our joined hands towards the tree, letting our magic mingle. Tendrils of frost swirled out, wrapping around the tree in a turquoise glow. Joy swelled as the once silent music caressed my hearing. Though I’d caught snippets of the language of winter before my transformation, I could now hear the beautiful woven song as molecules formed and joined to create patterns. The light faded and we surveyed our handiwork—ornate garlands of glittering ice hung from the branches, and intricate, glasslike ornaments swayed gently, catching the light.

“It’s perfect,” I whispered, laying my head on Frost’s shoulder.

“Not quite,” he responded. “I can’t have my tree decorated more finely than my queen.”

Once more he concentrated, wisps of magic swirling out to surround me and settle on my chest. I looked down to see a sparkling pendant, finer than any human diamond, resting above my heart, suspended from a chain of the most delicate ice.

“I’ve never seen anything more beautiful at any ball,” I murmured, touching it gently.

“It’s not as bright as your eyes,” he responded, leaning close to steal another kiss. “I thought they were beautiful when you were mortal, but they’re beyond lovely now. They used to be a pretty pale grey that made me think of a snow-laden cloud on a winter morning, but now they’re the exact shade of *our* magic.”

We settled onto the hearth next to our fire that cast soft warmth but didn’t melt the ornaments. “I’ve been thinking,” I said after a quiet pause. “We should visit Borealis. It’s been a while since we’ve seen him.”

Frost made a face. “Do we have to?”

I poked him playfully in the chest. “I don’t want you to ever endure the loneliness that once marred your existence. As one of Season’s Guardians he’s your family in a sense, as are the other seasonal rulers. Not to mention that he’s the one who married us, so shouldn’t you feel a sense of gratitude?” I smirked, knowing he’d have no comeback for that.

He heaved a dramatic sigh, antics marred by his adoring grin. “Very well, but only because I want to show him how well you’ve taken to your new role as well as show you off to the other Guardians. No one ever thought I’d let anyone share my throne.”

I tilted my head with a mock-serious look. “Well, he wasn’t wrong. You are rather stubborn, Frost.”

His chuckle was deep and rich as he leaned in to kiss me again, his lips brushing softly against mine. “And yet you still love me.”

“Always and forever,” I whispered against his lips.

In that moment, I knew that no matter how long eternity stretched before us, I would never grow tired of him, of us. Together, we ruled the winter realm, balancing the icy chill of nature with the warmth of our love. As Frost held me in

his arms with the world of snow swirling outside our palace of ice, I knew that this was the happily ever after I had never dared to dream of.

“I love you,” he murmured, his voice low and tender as he conveyed the words that I had spent my entire life seeking, only to discover them in the most unexpected place.

“And I love you.” I closed my eyes and let myself fall into the comforting embrace of the man who was my world, my king...and my forever.



# THANK YOU

Thank you for allowing me to share one of my beloved stories with you! If you'd like to be informed of new releases, please visit me at my website [www.camillepeters.com](http://www.camillepeters.com) to [sign up for my newsletter](#), [see my release plans](#), and [read deleted scenes](#).

I love to connect with readers! You can find me on [Goodreads](#), [Instagram](#), and on my [Facebook Page](#), or write me at [authorcamillepeters@icloud.com](mailto:authorcamillepeters@icloud.com).

If you loved my story, I'd be honored if you'd share your thoughts with me and others by leaving a review on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#). Your support is invaluable. Thank you.

# BOOKS BY CAMILLE PETERS

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The Royal Chronicles:

[Façade](#)

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\*~\*

The Enchanted Kingdom Chronicles:

[Forgotten](#)

Inspired by “East of the Sun, West of the Moon” and “The Snow Queen”

[Charmed](#)

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Stand Alone Novels:

[The Beast and the Enchantress](#)

[The Enchanted Frost](#)

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Camille Peters was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah where she grew up surrounded by books. As a child, she spent every spare moment reading and writing her own stories on every scrap of paper she could find. Becoming an author was always more than a childhood dream; it was a certainty.

Her love of writing grew alongside her as she took local writing classes in her teens, spent a year studying Creative Writing at the English University of Northampton, and graduated from the University of Utah with a degree in English and History. She's now blessed to be a full-time author.

When she's not writing she's thinking about writing, and when's she's not thinking about writing she's... alright, she's always thinking about writing, but she can also be found reading, at the piano, learning, playing board games with her family and friends, or taking long, bare-foot walks as she lives inside her imagination and brainstorms more tales.